A Passage through Sin: Life and Poetry of Forough Farrokhzad

Volume 1: The Novel

Only sound remains

and

Volume 2: The Exegesis

Forough Farrokhzad: of 'Sin' and her demons

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Submitted November 2020

Table of Contents

Abstract

Only sound remains is a novel informed by the life and poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad—the most controversial poet of modern Iran. Saeed, the narrator of the story, who has been living in Adelaide for five years, has not returned to Iran after publishing his novel *The imaginary narrative of a real murder*, for fear of political persecution. When his father, Ismael, decides to travel to Adelaide to visit him, Saeed finds it peculiar since his father has never left Iran except for the Mecca pilgrimage. During his short stay, Ismael tells the story of his obsessive and unrequited love for Forugh.

Ismael's love for Utopian ideas, his inability to make peace between his desires and spiritual aspirations, and his naive involvement in politics as the Shah and the Ayatollah are struggling for power, is used to depict the ethos of the society of Farrokhzad's time. It is against this socio-political background that the story of her endeavour to be her own individual rejecting the accepted norms of her society, is narrated. Ismael's duplicity and at times his nonchalant cruelty, is an index of how the patriarchal society tried to punish and discipline Forugh for her unconventional choices both as a poet and as a woman. Through this narrative, Saeed sees the country he has left behind and his relationship with his father in a new light.

The exegetical component of this thesis examines the aspects of Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry that agitated the core social and political tenets of Iranian society and provides a deeper understanding of the tense interaction between the poet and her surroundings. Farrokhzad's poetry started an unprecedented poetic discourse on women's sexuality in Iran. Through close reading of her poems, the exegesis suggests that ambivalence and fluctuations between self-doubt and self-confidence are central to her life and poetry; and she was pushed to the verge of nervous breakdown repeatedly, mainly because she approached love against the ethos of her time. Further, this exegesis argues that the confessional nature of Farrokhzad's poetry—in a

society where confession is neither part of its Islamic tradition nor culturally praised—played a central role in the extreme reactions her poetry evoked.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Hossein Asgari

Acknowledgments

The idea to write a novel about the contemporary Iranian poet, Forugh Farrokhzad, was formed during a talk with my uncle, Jafar Sarve. However, *Only sound remains* might have never been written if it were not for the Ph.D. position at the University of Adelaide and the RTPS scholarship I was awarded. For that, I would like to thank those in the Department of English and Creative Writing who gave me the opportunity to undertake a Ph.D. in Creative Writing and to be part of the J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, for four wonderful years.

Many great books and writers helped and inspired me as I worked on my novel. Two amazing biographies guided me as I tried to understand the life, times, and poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad: *A lonely woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and her poetry*, by Michael Hillmann; *Forugh Farrokhzad: A literary biography with unpublished letters*, by Farzaneh Milani. The latter is the source for the letters I have used in my novel—for which I am grateful to Prof. Milani. I became familiar with Khalil Maleki and the important role he played in politics and society of his time through a number of brilliant books by Homa Katouzian: *Khalil Maleki: The human face of Iranian socialism*; *Political memoire of Khalil Maleki*; *Letters of Khalil Maleki*; and *A eulogy for Khalil Maleki*. Finally, it was only after reading the inspiring book, *Time will say nothing*, by Ramin Jahanbegloo, that the character of Amir-Hossein came to me.

The translation of Farrokhzad's poetry are mine and so are the shortcomings. The translation of Parvin Etesami's poetry cited in my exegesis are Farzaneh Milani's.

Many thanks are due to my supervisors, Prof. Jennifer Rutherford and Dr Rachel Hennessy, my friends, Gemma Parker, Lyn Dickens, Banjo James, Camille Roulière, and other academics and students who have supported me during the last four years.

Finally, my love and gratitude to Elizabeth Chang who had more faith in me than I did; without her encouragement I would have never started this endeavour.

A Passage through Sin: Life and Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad

Volume 1: The Novel

Only sound remains

For my parents who read to me when I couldn’t
&
Elizabeth Chang without whose enouragment I would never have embarked on this journey.

They will utter with their tongues something that is not in their hearts.
—Al-Fath [48:11]

The little quantum of truth that is any use to you, you receive gratis and for nothing; and if it is mixed with lies and errors, this too is for your health's sake; undiluted, it would sear your entrails. Don't try to purge your soul of lies, so much else you didn't think of will follow in their wake; you'll only lose yourself, and all that's dear to you. "Thou shalt not ask!"
—Hjalmar Söderberg, Doctor Glas

Chapter One

I found the news of my father's travel to visit me unsettling. It triggered something inside me and I started thinking about Payam again, his disappearance and his death. Whatever I felt during that time came back, as fresh as the first day. Guilt. Rage. Sorrow. I had moments when I closed my eyes and breathed slowly, trying to calm my nerves, knowing I was one breath away from a panic attack. Ellie, my partner, was the one I could talk to, but she was always tired and overworked after her recent promotion and I did not want to burden her more. I started taking EFFEXOR again, whatever was left in the fridge from some two years ago, and in a few weeks, I was ready to greet my father with a smile.

In the airport, kids were running; beautiful women were lingering in colourful dresses; two old men were sipping their coffee; Payam was lurking in the shadows; and I was thinking about the dream I had had last night. I was in a concrete pit, deep enough that I could not touch the edge even when I jumped. There was a clock on the wall. Every second a droplet of water fell in. Eventually I was going to drown. How had I ended up in the pit? I had fallen in while running. From what? I did not know. I closed my eyes, and breathed slowly, trying to hold the panic back, but it washed over me like a wave and I woke up with a gasp.

"Saeed!"

One thousand and seven hundred days and my father had grown older than I expected. Thin and humpy, uniformly white unkempt hair, bony face. Only his eyes had stayed the same: vivid and bright. No matter how old we grow, something remains untouched, something which pours out of our eyes. I got to my feet and hugged him. We stayed like that for a minute or two. In silence.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’m alright. Did you have to wait for long?”

“Not really. You don’t have any more luggage?”

“No, just the one.”

“Let me carry it.”

“I can manage.”

“How was your flight?”

“I took two sleeping pills at the start, so I didn’t notice much.”

“At your age it’s a bit risky not to move for thirteen hours. How is mum doing?”

The light in his eyes disappeared. They filled with something incomprehensible, something unpleasant. Anger? Disappointment? I could not pin it down.

“She is okay,” he murmured.

“She couldn’t have come?”

“Doctor said it would be suicide.”

“How is Hamid doing?”

“Good. You know how he is, always working, always positive.”

It was good that he had his favourite son on his side, I thought. We walked for a few seconds before I said, “Welcome to Adelaide.” I forced a smile. He nodded his head and kept walking.

“We have to take a cab on the other side, and let me carry that,” I said, before grabbing the luggage out of his hand.

“It’s the bag they gave me during my Mecca pilgrimage. Quite solid. We can go by bus if it’s cheaper.”

“It’s pretty much the same,” I said. I was in no mood to wait for the bus. “Don’t be worried about money, I earn more than enough,” I lied. What I paid for my studio apartment ate up most of my income.

“It’s really warm,” he said.

“It’s one of those nights.”

“It’s winter back home.”

“I know.”

There was only an old man in front of us before we got into a cab. On the way home, my father looked out of the window. I leaned my head back and distorted colours rushed into the window frame as I struggled to keep my eyes open.

“Saeed—” I turned my head to see the same unpleasant look, the one I saw when I asked about my mother “—is it worth it?”

I knew what he meant, but I still asked, “What do you mean?”

He turned his head and let his gaze take asylum in the colours of the night.

*

I took out two chairs to the small balcony and we sat.

“This is a tiny apartment.”

“Here most apartments are.”

“You look tired.”

“Had a long day.”

“Still tutoring math?”

“Yeah.”

“You should look for a permanent job.”

“I *am* looking,” I lied. Just the idea of a nine-to-five job made me anxious.

We chitchatted about family and friends, looking at the city’s flickering lights. Newborn babies, the recently deceased, newlyweds, and at one point, my cousin’s new car. It took less than an hour. I was not surprised that there was little for us to talk about. I could not expect too

much of connecting on a personal level from someone who only felt at ease in his room, reading, or in his small backyard, gardening, even if he was my father.

There was silence. I was aware that as long as I did not answer my father's question—the one I had avoided in the cab—we would go from one awkward silence to another.

"I had to write it," I said eventually. Payam was my best friend and he had disappeared into the thin air as if he had never existed. And I did not do anything. I did not look for him because I was scared. Like a coward! I started writing about it because I did not have a choice. Writing about his death was the only way to get rid of the guilt—to get rid of the fog surrounding my brain after his death, to have peace again and be able to go on.

"I have nothing against you writing that novel. But you didn't have to publish it. It's too damn political! You knew that if you published it you might not be able to come back and you still did it. You may never see your country, your family, friends and most important of all, your mother again. *Was it worth it*?"

I took a sip of my tea and kept quiet.

"It is time I slept," he said.

*

I struggled to sleep. I could feel Payam's presence, time slowing down to the night I talked to him for the last time, the clock showing 9:00 pm sharp. He had called to ask me to attend the protest organised for the next day, the one expected to be the biggest since the rigged—so many believed—presidential election. I told him I was not going. The conversation was short and left me embittered. Since then, my chest tightened under the pressure of an invisible hand every time a clock showed 9:00, every time the answer to an equation turned out to be nine, or nineteen, or ninety, every time number nine appeared on a bill… Once, nine was one of my favourite numbers.

My father woke me in the middle of the night. He wanted to pray and asked about *qiblah*. He could not find his *qiblah* locator and kept repeating that he was sure he had put it in his damn luggage. Hazy with sleep, I had no idea which direction Mecca was. I pointed towards the balcony, the studio's sliding glass window. At least it had a nice view.

*

The next morning my father was in bed reading *A modern history of Iran,* which he had borrowed from my collection, with a cup of tea on the bedside table. He said that he only wanted to stay in and take rest for the day. I sat behind my desk preparing myself for the afternoon's sessions when I remembered I had forgotten to buy eggs. I wanted to fix a quick omelet for lunch before going to work, and left the apartment for the convenience store just a few blocks away.

When I came back and put the eggs in the fridge everything looked the same, but I could not rid myself of the afterimage of a scene I had glimpsed as I entered the room: my father sliding something under the blanket before picking up the book he had been reading previously.

I started cooking when he was in the shower. "Dad, do you mind if I add some mushrooms to the omelet?" He did not hear me over the sound of water. I left the mushrooms in the sink to arrange his bed. I was surprised at what I found under the blanket. I put it back and rearranged everything as it was.

*

There should be nothing surprising about a retired teacher of Persian literature carrying a *diwan* of poetry. However, the one I had just found under his blanket belonged to one of the most controversial poets in contemporary Persian literature. A woman. When I had heard her name for the first time during my teenage years, my father's library—home to almost all the most significant Persian poetry collections, both classic and contemporary—was the first place I looked for her poetry. I could not find them in his library. I had a vague recollection of asking

my father if he had any of her books, as they were out of print and banned at the time. He must have said no, since I bought a pirated copy on the black market. Now, here was one of the oldest ever published copies of her collected poetry under his blanket.

Quite intriguing that my father, who had always expressed affection in the most controlled manner—if at all—had come all this way and brought only one book, and that was by Forugh Farrokhzad: the poet of worldly love.

I glanced at the copy of the English translation of Forugh's selected works in my bookshelf. It sat next to my own novel, *The imaginary narrative of a real murder.* One thousand copies published and even less sold. I picked it up and skimmed through. "To Payam and all the disobedient sons," read the first page. The next page narrated the gist of a Persian myth in which the legendary Rostam unwittingly kills his own long-lost son on a battlefield. At the bottom of the page, I had jotted one of Forugh's verses down, which during my depression after Payam's disappearance I had recited under my breath constantly.

Life perhaps is a rope
with which a man
hangs himself from a branch.

*

The second day, I took my father to the beach. Ocean, nonchalant and sublime, always eased my sense of foreboding. Since his arrival, I had been waiting for bad news. My father hated travelling and had never left Iran except for the Mecca pilgrimage. In my first year in Australia I had tried for weeks to persuade him to join my mother, who was coming to visit me—since she would have a hard time travelling alone—but his answer was always no. Now here he was, four years later, when my mother was too sick to travel and he himself seemed weak and tired all the time. Something was terribly wrong; why else would he bother travelling all this way?

“Wait for a second,” I said as we get off the tram. I put sunscreen on his face. “Rub it all over. The sun here is a killer.”

“You need to be much younger than me to have enough time to be killed by the sun,” he said.

I took off my shoes and socks. He kept his on. We walked on the beach listening to the ocean. In a few minutes, small beads of sweat were rolling down his forehead and were blocked by his thick eyebrows.

“Do you want a cold drink?” I asked.

He nodded. We walked away from the beach to the pavement and stayed under the shade of a palm tree.

“Wait here for me,” I said and ran towards a convenience store. When I got back he was standing at the same spot, in the same posture. I passed him a ginger beer. He took a sip of his drink.

“I just talked to Ellie and she said hi,” I said.

“Say hi to her for me,” he said. I did not respond, waiting for more. Since yesterday, I had been waiting for him to ask about her, to acknowledge her presence in my life. He knew how important she was to me. It was only after meeting her that my life had slowly turned to be more than a day-to-day emotional struggle, carried on only with the help of EFFEXOR, my little pink friends. “How is she doing?” he asked finally, as if feeling compelled.

“She is well. Travelling interstate for work.”

“Good, good,” he said.

We finished our drinks and walked down to the beach. I stood near the sea and let the water wash the heat off my feet. He stayed back, not to get his shoes wet.

“When was the last time you were by the sea?”

“Long time ago,” he said.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“The water is quite warm today.”

“Yes,” he said absentmindedly.

“Do you want to swim?”

He stared at the sea and did not respond.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. It was early to eat, but there was not much to say or to do.

“I could eat.”

“What do you feel like having?”

“Let’s have fish. That’s the only halal food one can get here, I guess,” he said.

“Mum always cooked fish for the New Year.”

“No one can cook a better fish than she does.”

“There are some fish-and-chip shops near the tram station,” I said.

“Good. Let’s have fish for lunch. I don’t think we can find any other halal food here.”

“Sure. Fish for lunch, as we decided,” I said a bit surprised and saw a ghost of something like embarrassment shimmering in his eyes.

He waited at a table outside the shop. When I came out, he was staring at an oil stain on the table, lost in time.

“There you go, fish and chips with tartare sauce.”

He snapped back to the present. “Thanks,” he said and took a bite.

“Is it good?”

“Very fresh. Eat!”

“You eat first.”

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“You go ahead. I’ll eat some chips.”

"Chips?"

"I'm not eating meat."

He looked at me in perplexity. "If you don't like fish go and get whatever you like," he said after a second or two.

"I like fish. I just don't eat meat."

"Why? Are you sick or something?"

"No. I just think it's wrong." He stared at me as if he did not believe what he had heard. "Enjoy your food. I'll eat later."

"What's wrong with eating meat?"

"Let's talk about it later. Eat it before it gets cold."

"What is it? One of these new-age trends?"

I kept quiet. He took a few bites before he stopped. I looked at him rubbing his agitated fingers on a tissue. I wanted to say, *I thought you were hungry, don't you want to finish it?* But I kept quiet. I could not think of anything, to do or to say, to make him feel better.

*

The third day, I woke up to see him leaning back in his bed reading Forugh's *diwan*.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked, unexpectedly cheerful.

"Avocado and mushroom sandwich. Is that alright?" I answered, trying to mask my surprise.

"Do you have a class today?"

"Only in the afternoon."

"I need to tell you something, but let's eat breakfast first."

Here it comes, I thought. And right when I had started thinking that perhaps he had only come to visit me after all. At breakfast, he spoke only once, when he followed my gaze to Forugh's *diwan* lying on the bed, left open in the middle.

"I'll explain that too."

I collected the dishes and put them in the sink.

"Make yourself comfortable. It might take a while," he said.

"What's this about, dad? You're making me worried."

"Nothing to worry about."

I took out my study chair and sat on it, feeling uncomfortable, like somebody who was getting ready to be cross-examined. He sat on the bed and picked up the *diwan*.

My whole being is a dark verse which

—while chanting you—

will take you to the dawn

of eternal growth and blossoming.

In this verse, I sighed you, ah!

In this verse, I grafted you

to the tree and the water and the fire.

"It's beautiful," he said after a pause. "Have you ever wondered who the mentioned *you* is?"

"*Another birth* is dedicated to I. G., and people say it's Ibrahim Golestan, Forugh's long-time lover."

"It's interesting that it's the same initials as for my name—Ismael Gorgani. I'm sure it's not me, but I wish it was," he smiled.

"What do you mean?"

"Her father's house was only a few blocks down the road from ours, at the dead end of our alley. I was four years younger than Forugh, and…"

He squinted, as though he was trying to see something clearer.

"And?"

*

She and God entered my life almost at the same time. The summer that I read her poem, the one that caused all the furore, I joined my father to pray at the mosque for the first time. I liked being in the mosque. After the prayers, when the person next to me shook my hand as a sign of brotherhood, I felt as if I was part of something larger than life and death, larger than the universe. Something was sweeping through the centuries before drowning my body and soul, washing away all my petty needs and desires. Like a droplet that had joined the sea I became as vast as the sea itself. Immortal. Invincible. I wished that that serene ecstasy could last forever, but life and its realities would kick in as soon as I stepped outside.

I admired the imam of the mosque, Ayatollah Entezari. He was tall, well-built, with a broad wrinkle-free forehead, an everlasting smile, and a solid reputation for benevolence and generosity. Entezari was relatively young and had already managed to reach the rank of ayatollah, which made his choice of being the imam of a regular mosque in Tehran a bit of a mystery. There were rumours regarding his relocation from Qom Seminary to Tehran, but I found none of them compelling.

It was through his religious sermons that I truly learnt about sin: that it was not something abstract. Our actions, wills, even our most private thoughts and desires could interact with the material world, have consequences, and bring God's blessing or torment. The first time I shook his hand and asked a religious question, I never thought that this was the beginning of a strange friendship between a teenager and a middle-aged man which would last for many years to come.

And then there was her. I only read the poem by accident—the one responsible for all the uproar. I saw the title of the magazine, *The Intellectual*, when Zari tried to snatch it out of Goli's hands. "Let me see her picture!"

"What are you looking at? Aren't you supposed to be at the shop?" Goli said when she noticed me. She was five years younger than Zari, but was already married and five months pregnant.

"I'm not going to work today," I mumbled. "I've twisted my ankle."

My sisters would never buy a magazine named *The Intellectual*. When my mother and sisters left the house, I found the magazine hidden under Zari's mattress. The piece, entitled "The bold poet", had a biography, a poem, and a picture. Her eyes could not conceal the insecurity floating underneath, and her smile, as if subdued right before turning full and complete, revealed a thin streak of white teeth. I checked the picture and examined every detail, from the strand of hair on the forehead to the shapely thick lips, before I moved to the text. It introduced Forugh as one of the youngest poets of Iran, who had quit high school when she fell in love and got married. Now she lived with her husband and her two-year old baby boy in Ahvaz. She wished for women's social progress and the freedom to express themselves without fear of being ostracised. The article concluded with a poem: "Sin". I read it in one breath.

I sinned, a gratifying sin,

in an embrace, warm and ardent,

I sinned embraced by arms,

hot and vindictive and iron.

In that dark and silent seclusion,

I looked into his mysterious eyes

my heart trembled impatiently in my chest

by the desires in his yearning eyes.

In that dark and silent seclusion,

I sat anxiously at his side,

his lips poured desire on my lips,

I escaped the sorrow of the crazed heart.

I read into his ear the tale of love

I want you, O, my dearest,

I want you, O, life-giving embrace,

O, you, my frenzied lover.

Desire sparked a flame in his eyes

the red wine danced in the glass

in the soft bed my body,

shivered drunkenly on his chest…

My heart pounding, my face burning with shame, I read it word by word over and again. Goli must have borrowed it from a friend, since it had been published months before. I had a

feeling that this document of infamy had passed through many hands and its journey was not about to end yet.

I copied the poem down on a piece of paper and hid it under my mattress. Every day I took it out of its hiding spot and read it again. I was the man in the poem, her frenzied lover. It was into my ear that She whispered the tale of love; in my embrace that She sought life. She: black eyes, mischievous smile, a thread of hair almost touching her lips—slightly open, withered, waiting for a kiss to bring them back to life. She was my love. She was a disgrace. She was my love. She was a harlot. She was my love. She was…my sin.

*

My father stopped his narrative, and walked to the cabinet to fix himself a cup of tea. "Where do you keep your teabags?"

"Right there, in the first drawer."

"When we speak about humans, we try to explain the unexplainable—" he dipped a teabag in his cup and stayed still for a few seconds "—we go round and round as we talk and speculate with a serious frown on our face that makes us look ridiculous, when the so-called truth with its shady suspicious existence or with all its non-existence sits at the centre with a smile on her face that reads: I know things that you don't!"

He sat back and stared at the white cup in his hand. A minute or so passed. He inhaled the jasmine-scented steam, and murmured, "The smell of spring. It always brings to life the first image I have of her."

*

Her white floral chador was twirling in the wind, revealing some of her skin, as Forugh passed by us kids playing on the street. Somebody shouted my name; my gaze dropped down her

dancing chador, and I kicked the ball clumsily. It hit her ankle and bounced back. She turned her head and smiled at me.

She walked by Davud and he turned towards us, crossed his eyes, puckered his lips, kissed the air, curled up his fingers and jerked them back and forth in front of his penis. Hasan—Forugh's playmate before she was considered too old to play with boys—shook his head in reproach and walked away. Davud shouted, "Hey faggot! If you walk away, you won't come back! Never!" I despised Davud. But I wanted to be part of the gang and joined in laughing with everybody else.

I knew she was in love. I had heard my sisters gossiping about Forugh and Parviz, who was twenty-seven and almost eleven years older than her. Neither of the families was in favour of the marriage. Forugh was persistent, though, and she would not give up. That was all I had heard about that love story and as an eleven-year-old boy I could not care less.

After weeks of crying and days of hunger strikes, she finally got married. It was a simple ceremony with just close relatives and a few neighbours. No kids were invited. Soon after the wedding, she moved to Ahvaz with her husband.

*

For a few years, I forgot that she existed until one night at dinner, when I was fifteen, I heard Forugh had returned from Ahvaz to stay at her father's house. The next-door neighbours had heard Forugh screaming and crying and her father shouting furiously.

"This Farrokhzad family never fails to make a scene," my mother said, and others joined in bringing up memories of their disgrace. They had awakened the whole neighbourhood twice. Once, Forugh had attempted suicide during her teenage years. She was lucky that there were two physicians in the neighbourhood, otherwise she would not have made it. There was something seriously wrong with her from the very beginning.

Another time Forugh's mother, Turan, had ambushed her husband's second wife, beat her, and dragged her on the ground by her hair. When people managed to separate them, rushing into the street after hearing all the yelling and screaming, Turan had a clump of hair in her hand.

The gossip went on for a while after dinner and over tea. Didn't Forugh choose her husband? My mother and sisters couldn't understand it. She had a good-looking spouse, financial security, a baby boy. Why divorce, then? What else did she want from her life? How could a mother do this to her only baby boy? It seemed she was incapable of living a peaceful, quiet life. And the poem! Who would publish such brazen nonsense as poetry? When Forugh published that so-called poem, Parviz did not go to work out of shame for two weeks. He should have divorced her straight away after kicking her out of the house. However, he did not do anything and Forugh came back to Tehran in a couple of months and had a contract for her first book as if nothing had happened. The neighbours had seen her right before going back to Ahvaz with a few boxes in her hand. Gifts for her husband and son, Kami, to celebrate her book contract with them. Turan swore to God that she had asked Parviz not to give his wife too much freedom. He had not listened, and now look at all the scandals: the poem, that shameless man, and now the divorce…

Even my father who would not usually tolerate gossip listened in silence. What poem were they talking about? Which shameless man? What had he done? I did not ask. I knew that no one would deign to answer a teenager's question on such sensitive matters.

*

A couple of days later, I saw Forugh again, while coming back from my father's grocery shop where I worked during the summer holidays. That afternoon I was coming down with a flu. My father made me a herbal drink and sent me home to rest. I turned a corner and there she was. A white chador, imprinted with tiny grey leaves, sitting loosely on her head and showing

her marble neck. Her slender fingers rested between her breasts to hold her hijab as it danced with the wind and played hide and seek with her skin.

Her steps were not as brisk as the last time I had seen her and something about her gaze had changed. Grown more melancholic? Matured? I could not tell. Her body was not one of a teenager either, and she looked more like a woman. When she passed me by, a tingle ran down my spine, and I turned without thinking and followed her, listening to the pounding of my heart, ignoring the scorching sun. My eyes, burning with fever, followed the gentle movements of her buttocks masked by the soft fabric of her chador. She suddenly stopped, turned, and I hid behind a tree until I was sure she was gone.

I ran back home and for the first time in my life did what Davud had pantomimed four years ago. This time I did not find it funny. Surprised with pleasure and overwhelmed with guilt, my body started burning with fever and I was in hell for the next three days. After that I did not miss any chance to sneak out of my father's shop or to hang around the streets hoping to see her again. I had no other encounter with her during that summer, but it didn't stop me from fantasising about her. She was the reason for my restlessness, the temptation, the unbearable guilt…I hated her. Thinking of those dark black eyes and subtle smile, my heart grew soft…I loved her.

*

I asked my friends from the street about the scandalous poem, trying to bring it up as casually as possible. They knew nothing.

"I climbed the tree in front of her parents' house and I could see right through her bedroom," Davud said. "She knew I was there but didn't care. She started changing into her—"

"You are lying," I dared to whisper.

"What did you say?"

I swallowed my pride and answered, "I asked when that was."

*

I snuck out of the house when the city was asleep and stood at the tree in Davud's story night after night. What if I climbed it and somebody saw me? Everybody in that neighbourhood knew my family and me and I could not think of any excuse for what I was about to do. Always I returned home angry with myself, Davud, Forugh and the whole world. I knew that Davud was a liar and a boaster, but I still had to know, had to be sure.

Finally one night I took a deep breath, grabbed the lowest branch, pulled myself up, and climbed until I had a clear view of the windows into two large rooms at the other side of the yard. One almost dark room with a sizeable bookshelf: the father's. A silhouette of a man, sitting on a rocking chair, motionless, reading. Another one, the mother's, lit with a dim light and full of dolls. A middle-aged woman was sitting on the bed, combing the golden hair of a big doll in a white bridal gown. There was something spooky, eerie, about the room, the shadows, the slow motion of the woman's hand and her half-smile. A bizarre feeling started swirling in my stomach and a phrase was finding its way out of my subconscious: *crazy doll lady*. I was trying to remember where and when I had heard that phrase when she raised her head. Without thinking, I slid back on my butt and hung from the branch for a second before I let go.

While jumping off the tree I sprained my foot, but even the pulsing pain in my ankle could not stop me from thinking about her. I had heard that if you focused all your mental energy on a wish it would come true. I wished I could see her again soon. I did not get the wish, but it was the next morning that I saw my sisters fussing over "Sin".

*

At times, I managed to ignore the poem written on a piece of recycled brown paper hidden under my mattress, but not for long. The urge to take it out and read it would return. There was something about the poem, about the description of two bodies coming together for no higher

purpose but their desire, that every single cell in my body agreed with. “Sin” fed into my obsession, kept her vivid and alive in my mind, and never failed to set my imagination free. In my fantasies I was not a hopeless teenager, but assured and confident. We made love over and again until I knew every curve, every taste, every touch. I lived and even grew old with her. The only other companion in that blessed imaginary life of mine, the one that would never leave, was guilt.

I tried to compensate for my sinful fantasies with good deeds. I would fast for a few days in a row, wake up in the middle of the night to pray and throw money into charity boxes. I would even wander around the city to help people: carrying an old lady’s groceries; offering help in a mosque I had never been to; giving a hand to disabled people on the street. These acts could temporarily silence the whispers of the accusing voice in my head—ancient, grave, and imposing—which kept reminding me that *my body* was wrong, *he* was right.

Chapter Two

"Let's have a break," my father said.

We left for a nearby park. Hard to believe that under that furrowed forehead and inscrutable face still lived the memory of a love that had not left him alone all these years. Hard to imagine father as a young man capable of such desire. I had also found his description of Forugh's hijab peculiar. Pictures I had seen of her showed that she was not covering her head. Maybe that day she was wearing a white chador, for some unknown reason. Not to attract attention as a divorcee? To go to one of the holy shrines around Tehran? She was not religious per se, but considered herself spiritual. Or maybe, after decades, the picture had changed in my father's mind? I could ask, but having seen my father talking openly about his past and his feelings, I felt strained the way I did around strangers.

As we passed by the city centre, I could tell that he found the variety of people with different clothing, appearances, and colours quite curious.

"There are plenty of green spots all over the city," he said as we entered the park. "It gives people, ordinary people, so much space. You can't grow without space."

We walked around the park without uttering another word. He did not seem to be bothered by the silence, and why should he have been? We were quiet not because I felt uneasy and did not know what to say, but because he wished to maintain the silence for now, and to convey that he did not need to use his words—as if, hiding behind the silence his entire life, he had mastered its language. We sat on a bench near a lake.

He took out the packet of bread we had just bought and started feeding the ducks. At one point, I saw him staring at a spot on the lake and throwing the pieces of bread absentmindedly.

I pretend that I had not noticed anything, bending forward towards the lake, putting my fists under my chin. There was chaos in the lake with the ducks quacking and fighting. Without turning my head, I sneaked a peek at him. He jolted out of his reverie, looked at the almost empty packet of bread, and a blush crawled up his neck and disappeared under his beard before he put it back in the shopping bag. I sat there staring right ahead of me for a few more minutes, until he broke the silence that he did not wish to maintain anymore.

*

I had learnt from Ayatollah Entezari that the accumulation of people's sins could bring God's wrath upon them. When I said that to my history teacher at school—who was talking about the demise of the Sasanian Empire—he said, as if talking to himself, "Then with all the corruption, injustice and tyranny, this city must be flattened on a daily basis."

The earthquake of our sins eventually came when I was in one of the bookshops that I frequented while waiting for Forugh's first book to be finally out. I was leafing through a book, trying to avoid eye contact with the salesman who was curious about the teenager who came to his shop almost every day, browsed books in silence, and left without buying anything or uttering a word.

I was standing next to the shop display window when it began to vibrate. The ground under my feet joined it in harmony and I thought, *Here it comes!* A few seconds and I could hear the sound of crying, screaming, and shattering, as if a sudden hell had broken out of the peace that had seemed unwavering a minute ago. I stood frozen with fear. The salesman shouted "Come here!" as he beckoned me to join him behind the desk. The book in my hand hit the ground. I looked over my shoulder and saw the gun of a tank slowly appearing in the window frame. A brick shattered the window and a rain of luminous glass flew towards me. Bending over, I ran for the desk and hunched next to the salesman. In a minute or two when we peeked over the desk, the newspaper stall at the other side of the street was on fire.

"Don't move!" the salesman said. *I am not planning to,* I thought. He raised his hand and pulled a piece of glass out of my face. A sting, and the warm trace of blood ran down my cheek. He took a blue-checked handkerchief, folded neatly, from his shirt pocket and pressed it on the cut.

"Hold it tight."

I pressed it on my face and felt the blood seep through the fibres of the handkerchief. I had to leave. I had just realised that the same thing had happened with urine and the fibres of my pants. I bolted for the door, leaving behind his words asking me to stay until it was safe. It was the last time I stepped into that bookshop.

I was in the middle of a coup, in streets controlled by soldiers and thugs, and all I could think of was my pee-soaked pants. The only sight obscure enough to distract me from my pants was a Jeep driving by, with a few men sitting inside and a woman standing on the side—her chador looped once around her waist and fastened behind her neck—waving a wooden club in her right hand, the left hand holding the window shield as she chanted, "Long live the Shah!"

I was not taken to a clinic, since with all the chaos and blood no one would care about a little cut. Our neighbour, Dr. Meshakt, did the stitches for me before she left for a double shift. When my parents were reassured that I was alright, the scolding started. After the first failed coup a few days before, my father had warned me every morning when I was about to leave the house that I should not loiter about the city after school and come home straight away. Then I had sneaked out of school to go to a bookshop!

A couple of weeks before, I had heard Ayatollah Entezari saying to my father that Prime Minister Mosaddegh would eventually pay for oil nationalisation. The British would not settle for anything less that another concession or full compensation for the forty years that remained of the previous one. The Americans, on the other hand, did not want Mosaddegh's attempts at oil nationalisation to turn into a success story of independence that could inspire other oil-rich

countries. It was a matter of time before Mosaddegh was doomed, one way or another, Ayatollah Entezari had concluded. My father had only sighed and shaken his head.

Entezari was proved right. Before dusk, the Mosaddegh government was overthrown. The Shah returned to the country to rule with absolute power. Well, as absolute as his power could get under the gaze of Britain and America, who had threatened to replace him with his son if he did not agree to the coup.

I was not interested in politics yet, but I had become connected to the coup through my wet pants and wounded face. I followed the news. Two to three hundred died during the conflicts. Mosaddegh was arrested. Later he was tried and sentenced to three years in prison for treason, which was followed by house arrest for the rest of his life.

*

I had to wait for few weeks before I could convince my parents that it was safe for me to get out of the house freely. That day, I had just returned from one of my random strolls around the city. They helped me to overcome the urge to see her when nothing else could distract me. It had not worked though, and I had missed the congregational prayers too. Still restless, and angry at myself for missing mosque, I reminded myself that I had to be more disciplined and got ready to do my prayers on my own. I was at the end of my evening prayers when I heard her name. I prolonged my prayers, going through different postures automatically without saying a word, as I hoped to hear more.

"Such a ridiculous title, *The captive*!" Zari said.

"The poor girl is stuck with a good-looking husband in a nice house. Somebody should save her, for God's sake!" Goli stopped giggling and looked at me over her huge belly. I was standing there staring at them, not even pretending that I was praying anymore.

"Are you praying or what? Don't you have anything else to do, Ismael?" she asked.

I did. I had to get my hands on the book.

*

I bought the first edition of *The captive* nine times.

The first page read, *To my kind husband, Parviz, in appreciation of sacrifices he has made for my poetry*. I read the whole book in one sitting, with her at my side. She was longing to see *me*. She was asking *me* to hold her in my arms. In *my* kisses, she was looking for the fiery passion… I ripped the book into pieces.

Before long I was at the bookshop, buying *The captive*, again. Then another strike of guilt and the book was lying there, torn into pieces. It did not matter how many times I tore up the book; neither her words nor her eyes would leave me alone.

The seller looked at me suspiciously every time I entered the bookshop. However, he was a man of a few words and never tried to engage me in any conversation. After the first few times I stopped buying other books as a cover, as it had left me with a pile of poetry books I would never read. I picked up *The captive*, paid for it without a word, and left. I only stopped buying it when I had already memorised every single poem, word by word. All forty-four of them. Now I could not escape it. The "Sin" was in me. I carried it around.

Why was I so smitten with her? I wondered without finding any answer. Even if I had been older and financially independent, did I really want to be with a woman like her? To be more accurate, *could* I be with a woman like her? Could I ignore the smirks? The gossip? The slurs? Could I cope with the shame? With other possible mayhem that her "art" or her unconventional character could stir? How would I feel about passing by one of her former lovers? About other men checking her out? About their gaze on her body?

In my fantasies, however, I had no concerns and everything was perfect. We had two kids. My right hand was resting in our daughter's and her left hand was holding our son's as we walked towards a house, our house, where I was coming back to her every evening after a day

of work. The warm sun. Her smile. The breeze playing with her white chador. Isolated from the rest of the world. A moment worth freezing and framing to hang from the wall of every house in the world. Pure happiness. Love.

I had yet to realise that if she were to fit into that prudent picture of my fantasy I would not have been so enamored with her.

*

I found out who the "shameless man" was, the man depicted in "Sin" by Forugh: Nasser Khodayar, journalist and popular radio personality. He was also the writer of those supposedly fictitious pieces named "Blue blossom" that he published in *The Intellectual.* They narrated the story of an ambitious young woman who was determined to become an artist. Nasser had depicted the female persona in his stories in such a way that everybody knew it was the story of his love affair with Forugh before it went sour.

I was in my room eavesdropping when Goli said how Forugh had sent her brother, Freidun, and a couple of her friends to persuade Nasser not to publish those stories anymore, all in vain. If you chose to be with a player like Nasser, you knew what you were getting yourself into, Zari concluded. Under any other circumstances, I would have had no sympathy for the woman depicted in those stories either. She had got what she deserved. This was not any woman though; this was my woman, and her honour was mine.

The day after, I heard Nasser's voice on the radio for the first time: warm, friendly, and inviting. I listened to him—indignant, furious. I punched him in the face and kicked him in the groin. He was on his knees, his bulging nose covered in blood, begging for mercy when I heard the front door squeaking open. I turned off the radio and ran for my room.

*

There was a half-finished abandoned building near our house where stray dogs sought shelter, and as a result it was full of dog shit. I used them to make shit bombs. I put them in a thin transparent plastic bag, added some water, and used a straw to blow some air inside the plastic.

I loitered outside *The Intellectual*'s office with two freshly made shit bombs hidden in a brown paper bag. I had no plan. I had no idea about what Nasser would do after leaving the office. I was not even sure whether he was at work or not that day, or what he looked like. I had only seen one picture of him, in *The Intellectual* where he worked as an editor, and I could not tell whether the small, black-and-white picture of his profile would be enough to recognise him from. It was, and I followed him from the opposite sidewalk.

He was wearing a grey suit with white stripes, a black tie and a long black coat. He rolled up the collar of his coat as he stepped out to protect his neatly shaved cheeks against the frosty breeze. He was not as tall as I had imagined, but had broad shoulders and walked with the confidence of a man who was sure of his place in the world. I shadowed him until he climbed a narrow staircase next to a carpet shop. I stood staring at the building, and in a few seconds the light of the apartment on top of the shop was turned on. What was he doing there? I wondered. The apartment seemed too small to be his home, too small to even fit his ego.

I sat on the curb facing the building, not knowing what I was waiting for. It was an autumn evening, but the uniform luminous clouds in the sky promised imminent snow and an early winter. I could see the profile of the salesman in the carpet shop sitting at his desk, sipping his tea. I had waited long enough for the cold to seep into my bones when a woman in a grey winter coat passed by the shop and turned upstairs. *So, this is your den, you bastard!* This was the place the famous Don Juan met his lovers.

Whatever happened in that apartment had inspired Forugh to write "Sin". The thought enraged me. However, I waited a bit longer so as not to ruin the party before it was started. I took a bomb out. The water inside was already murky with shit. Weighing it in my right hand,

I waited for the right moment. I glanced at the salesman inside, who was sucking at a candy in his mouth, scratching his head, unaware of what was about to happen. I took a deep breath and squeezed the plastic gently in my hand—shaky with fear and cold—to cool my nerves.

It landed in the middle of the window and exploded. Then I acted in the most counterintuitive way and sat back on the curb while every single cell in my body was urging me to run. I leaned back against the tree behind the curb as the brown paper bag, with another shit bomb in it, sat right next to me. The salesman in the shop, done with his hair, was picking his nose. Nasser's naked torso appeared behind the window. He did not see me. Not because I was sitting in a dark spot, but because his head was turning right and left looking for someone running as I sat right under his nose, looking at his hairy chest, feeling satisfied with the chaos I had just caused. As he turned back, he glanced at me for a second, but decided to disregard the teenager who was sitting on a curb, rubbing his hands together and blowing into them for warmth. The apartment's light went off and soon after he came out, turned to his left, hesitated for a second, and strode off. After a while, the lady in grey stepped out, turned right, and walked away briskly. *I might have just interfered with the birth of an unlucky bastard*, I thought, and walked home.

A few decades later, I read an interview in which Nasser had claimed credit for Forugh's poetry. He mentioned the verse in one of her poems that read *Hey man! You turned me to a poetess* as a testimony to his claim. While reading that interview I remembered his anxious face on that cold autumn evening and smiled.

*

I bought the next issue of *The Intellectual*. The seventh part of "Blue blossom" had been published. After that I punctured his car tires, parked in a small alley next to *The Intellectual'*s office, and engraved it with a key on its blue hood: *Stop!* He did not. I did not know what else

I could do. A few days later, I was looking at the most recent torn copy of *The captive* when I came up with an idea. I was going to write Nasser a note.

No one knew that I even existed, so I did not have to be worried about my handwriting being recognised. But I was still paranoid that it might give me away, if he bothered to share a stupid letter with the police. I should have been more worried about my fingerprints, if anything. I cut out the verses *I am closing these two fiery eyes to pass through infamy* and *Do not complain of others, put an end to this madness!* from the fragmented pages of *The captive.* I scissored out the words I needed and glued the following on a white paper: *Put an end to this infamy!* Then I took out a few more verses and words and came up with the following:

Put an end to this infamy!

Aren't you afraid that eventually, this tale will drag you into the darkness of an unmarked grave? Aren't you afraid to have your name written on a dark tombstone in a silent gloomy night? Reproaching the actions, regretting the words!

One night when the whole city was asleep, I went to his apartment next to the carpet shop and slid the note under the door. The next and tenth part of "Blue blossom" was the last one. He may have stopped simply because he had said whatever he intended to say—he may have not even received my note—but I chose to believe otherwise.

*

My father leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I looked at the old line of the cut on my father's face—hairless and raw, glimmering under the sunlight. When he trimmed his beard short the whole cut became visible. I remembered asking him about it when I was a teenager. He had run through an over-polished glass door as a kid, he had answered. One example of my attempts to learn about his past, aborted by one short answer and followed by a silence that announced the end of the conversation. I had learnt over the years that we did not talk to connect, only to pass on information.

I pictured him in the middle of a bookshop, horrified, urine trickling down his legs. I wanted to say that I thought the coup had happened way before Forugh's first book was published. I glanced at the shopping bag that contained a few pieces of crumpled bread, sitting between us on the bench, and stayed quiet. Now I was sure that something was wrong, and decided to leave the old weary man next to me to repose in peace before going on with his story.

*

The "Blue blossom" may have stopped but it was already too late. Being divorced, having no source of income, living in the house of a raging father whose shoulders could not carry the shame of a daughter who was now the main character of an obscene story pushed her over the edge. She had a nervous breakdown, attempted suicide, and was admitted to Rezaei Psychiatric Hospital where she went through electroconvulsive therapy.

"Once a crazy bitch, always a crazy bitch!"

Crazy or not, I could not wait to see her. In my free time I hung around the street, sitting on a curb or leaning against a tree with a crime fiction novel in my hand, hoping to catch a glimpse of her.

One day, absorbed in my book, I did not notice that she was standing a few metres away from me. I raised my head and she was there. She wore a long red T-shirt, white pajamas and black slippers. Her hair was tangled and scruffy. She looked bewildered, putting her hand on a tree as if trying to keep her balance, staring at a point on the ground. She snapped out of it and murmured something unintelligible before looking at an envelope in her right hand next to her wallet as if wondering why it was there. She took a step forward towards me. I wanted to stand up and run but I could not move.

"Would you do me a favour and post this for me?"

I nodded. She opened her wallet to pay me for the favour.

"No need," I whispered. She shook her head and mumbled what I assumed to be words of appreciation. My eyes followed her as she walked back slowly towards her father's house, took out the key from her wallet, and disappeared behind the door.

The envelope was addressed to her ex-husband, Parviz, in Ahvaz. I held it up under the sun, hoping the rays of light travelling through would reveal some of the words. Nothing. On the one hand, I was dying to know its content. I even thought of finding a way to open it without leaving any trace. If I posted it in a day or two, she would never find out. On the other hand, I did not want to ruin the satisfaction I felt at being trusted by her. I posted the letter as it was.

Having seen Forugh in that condition was an uncanny experience for me. As a teenager, when you love someone, you place them beyond the ordinary and mundane, and to see them so fragile, so human, comes as a shock. However, even that experience did not survive the urge to see her. Not even for a full day. The day after, when I returned from school, I devoured my lunch—not listening to my mother lecturing me that gulping my food was bad for my digestion—grabbed a book and sat under the shade of the robust plane tree in front of our house.

Waiting for her to pass by again.

*

Four decades later when her letters to Parviz were published I read them, wondering which one of those letters, if any, I had held in my hand that late afternoon. Was it the letter in which she asked Parviz for financial support to arrange a trip to Europe? She told him that if she wanted to go, it was not because visiting other lands was of any interest to her. No! She believed that under this sky, one would never face anything new, and the core of life was vanity and endless repetition, and there was no asylum in this world for her restless soul… Or maybe the one in which she said she was only twenty-one, but already felt like a seventy-year-old woman and claimed that despite all her madness she always loved him and always would… Or perhaps the

one she wrote to complain to Parviz of moments of oblivion when her mind got emptied of any thought (had I witnessed one of those moments?) and she felt like she was not Forugh anymore, but someone who had lost her name, someone with a soul that suffered from understanding the absurdity of life and existence…

I could never be sure, since most of the letters were not dated. Understandably, she assumed she was writing just to her ex-husband and not to the generations of her fans to come—those who would be trying to make sense of the life of an "iconoclast" who ironically became an icon herself.

*

A while after I had posted the letter for her, I was reading a book under the shade of the plane tree, as was my daily ritual, when the door of the Farrokhzads' house opened. Mrs. Farrokhzad appeared, holding a tray that carried a bowl of water and a Quran. I knew straightaway that someone was travelling. She was followed by Mr. Farrokhzad, Forugh, Forugh'son Kami and her brother Freidun, who placed a suitcase in the boot of a white Paykan before getting behind its wheel. I walked towards Hasan's house and put my hand on the bell without pressing it. Now I was only a few metres away.

Mrs. Farrokhzad put the tray down and embraced her. Forugh sniffed into her tissue, got on her knees, squeezed Kami in her embrace and kissed him a few times. She stood up right in front of her father, whose eyes were glittering with tears that he blinked away. They stared at each other for a second or two, without uttering a word or doing anything. It was time to go.

Mrs. Farrokhzad held the tray up as Forugh passed underneath it; then she lowered the tray and let Forugh turn and pick the Quran up, place it on her forehead, kiss it and put it back. Mrs. Farrokhzad picked up the bowl and poured the water on the ground as Forugh walked towards the car. The engine roared. I collected all my courage and waved as the car passed by. She did not see me.

"What's up?" I heard Hasan's voice. He was standing behind me. I had buzzed the bell at some point.

"Do you want to hang out?" I asked.

At the time I did not know that Forugh was travelling to Europe and would not return for the next fourteen months.

*

Her second collection, *The wall*, was published soon after. *To Parviz, for what we shared in the past, and with the hope that this small token shows my appreciation for his immeasurable kindness*, read the first page. As an introduction, it had two pieces from the Old Testament and one from the Quran.

You don't make me feel warm anymore,
oh love, you frozen sun,
my heart is a wilderness of despair
I'm tired, tired even of love.
The blossom of your passion withered too,
oh poetry, you enchanting devil
finally, my soul was awakened,
awakened from this painful dream.

A sudden peace took me over. She had realised that she was pursuing and sacrificing herself for nothing but an illusion. Art, poetry, love, living one's life and dreams, were only words: slight and weightless. Loneliness, depression, poverty and pain were the reality: hefty and crushing. *What else did you expect?*

That night, I went to the half-finished abandoned house, the one that was a shelter for stray dogs. I ripped off those pages of introduction that quoted “Sura Al-Qamar” from the Quran, folded them, and put them in my pocket. Then I made a small fire in a pit and tore the rest of the book apart, fed it page by page to the fire as I recited the whole *Sura* by heart under my breath.

The Last Hour draws near, and the moon is split asunder! But if they were to see a sign, they would turn aside and say, “An ever-recurring delusion!”—for they are bent on giving it the lie, being always want to follow their own desires… But nay—the Last Hour is the time when they shall truly meet their fate; and that Last Hour will be most calamitous, and most bitter… And everything, be it small or great is recorded… Behold, the God-conscious will find themselves in gardens and running waters, in a seat of truth, in the presence of a Sovereign who determines all things…

The last piece of paper in my hand read:

I wish in your bed of loneliness
my body kindled a candle of sin
and your ascetic and my regret
were burnt by this sweet sinfulness.

I threw it in the fire too. There was no doubt, no question. My body calm. My mind clear. Oblivious to the howling of the beasts.

*

The sun was setting and it was time to go home. As we left the park, my father grabbed my hand with an unexpectedly strong grip, holding to it as if he relied on me to keep him going. I

took a glance at his right hand enfolding my left, the same hand that had held a letter of Forugh's.

As a fan of her works, I read the collection of her letters to Parviz years before I left Iran. The bit I still remembered was part of a letter written before their marriage. She talked about how she was going to manage the cost of their wedding so it would not be too expensive, and continued to explain how disinterested she was in money, and how a simple life by his side was enough for her. There was something hopeful and naive about the letter—written by a sixteen-year-old girl in love—that I found beautifully sad. Nothing like her late poems—written by a disillusioned woman who had experienced life beyond her years—which I always found sadly beautiful.

"What do you want to have for dinner?" I asked when we reached home. My father did not feel like eating and went straight to bed.

Chapter Three

Last night I thought of cancelling my morning classes. However, my father insisted that I should continue with my life as if he was not around. After two hours of teaching I came back to make lunch. My father was not at home. *Where has he gone?* He did not know his way around and barely spoke any English. *Why doesn't he carry a mobile?* I waited for a few minutes, hoping he would show up.

He might have gone to the nearby convenience store. The salesperson at the shop remembered him, as he had found his woollen jumper peculiar for such hot weather. He had also bought a small packet of bread and paid for it with a hundred-dollar note.

"How long ago?" I asked.

"An hour I guess, maybe a bit more."

I texted my student and cancelled the next session while rushing towards my unit. He must have gone this way and taken a wrong turn somewhere. He was nowhere around and I started looking for him in the opposite direction. Passing by the convenience store, I took the first turn. Further down the road, he was standing near a bookshop, looking bewildered, sweat running down his forehead. Something came up from my stomach and turned to a lump in my throat. I swallowed it back and ran towards him.

"Dad! Where have you been? I was worried sick!"

He let me hug him before saying, "I just came to buy some bread."

His hands were empty.

"It's too bloody hot. Let's go home."

We walked back home using every piece of shade we could find to avoid the sun.

"You need to change your clothes," I said. Under his grey woollen jumper, there was a white long-sleeved cotton shirt. "Leave the white one for me to wash. It's soaked in sweat."

I put after-sun lotion on the burning spots. A bit on his forehead and cheeks, some on his neck and shoulders, and some on sweat rashes on his back. He let me rub the remedy into his skin. I passed him a bottle of water from the cabinet. He gulped down half of it in one go.

"You should take a shower to cool off. I'll put more lotion on when you're done."

After the shower, he sat on the edge of my bed and drank the iced tea I had made for him. Something about his face told me that he was about to continue with his story.

"Why don't we just take some rest today, and when the weather has cooled off, I'll take you to the Botanic Gardens. You'd like it."

"I'm alright. I don't have much time left."

What did he mean by that? I wondered. Now, in Adelaide? Or ever?

*

It was during Forugh's absence that God completely conquered me. He rooted in me and grew out of me with my beard. He closed my eyelids when I saw an alluring woman, blocked my ears at the presence of any obscene words, and flew out of my mouth riding my righteous words. Entezari guided my metamorphosis.

Everyday I worked as a volunteer to clean and prepare the mosque before everybody came in for the congregational prayers. During the ten days of Muharram Mourning I helped the servant of the mosque to provide support for the mourners. I brought in water, served food, wiped the floor, and washed the dishes. After the prayers, when everybody left, I would stay and talk with Entezari about the sharia, or ask questions if I had any. He would answer all my concerns patiently. It is easy, my son, just promise that you would not commit the sin again and remember that Allah is the compassionate and merciful. Your body is instrumental in any

sin; make it tired through productive physical activities. Control your eyes, as whatever your eyes see your heart fancies.

One day, when I was asking whether God would find it in his grace to forgive us even when we fail to honour our words, I burst into tears.

"It's alright, my son! We're not infallible like the Prophet and his graceful family. Tomorrow I'll bring you something. It was a gift from my father. It helped me to discipline my body and by God's will it will help you too."

It was a small knife. A switchblade not more than five centimeters long. Dull and old, it could cut nothing. I pressed the blade to my palm to distract myself whenever I had any abominable thought or urge. I carried it everywhere. It reassured me whenever I held it in my hand or touched it in my pocket. After a while, my skin had grown red and swollen from the constant pressure. It did not do enough though. At the end of the day, that tiny knife was no weapon for such a great war, such a holy war.

*

One day in Ramadan, Entezari invited me over to break my fast at his house. After the evening prayers, we left for his house near the mosque, where he lived with his wife and four daughters.

"My youngest has Down's syndrome," Entezari said on the way.

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. She's doing alright."

The room, where we sat on the carpet around the *sofreh,* had no furniture except for a big colourful cushion located behind a desk with short legs where one could sit cross-legged and read. I was impressed with the shelves of books that surrounded the room, since in our house our only reading materials were the *Quran*, a book of S*implified stories of Shahnameh,* a *Diwan of Hafez,* my collection of poorly crafted crime stories, and some poetry books. To that I could

add a bunch of magazines my sisters bought that I was not allowed to touch, which I did anyway.

The dinner was simple. Bread, cheese, walnuts, fresh vegetables and barley soup. We ate in silence. When I was finished, the imam's wife teased me with a smile, "Have more, my son. Are you on a diet?"

I thanked her and politely refused. I was in one of those phases when I tried to control my body by not feeding it too much. Mrs. Entezari and three of her daughters—wearing the same grey chadors printed with small white petals—collected the *sofreh* and dirty dishes and left the room. Entezari's youngest daughter sat on his lap, put her hands around his neck, and leaned her face against his shoulder. He kissed her cheek and whispered something into her ear. She left, her chador hanging from her shoulders and exposing her curly black hair, waving at me with a smile. Entezari guessed that I was about to ask him another question and said, "No more questions about sharia tonight. I'm sure you know enough to survive another day!"

We talked about my family, my school, and my future plans. My father wanted me to become a physician. He believed it to be the most rewarding career one could have. It brought comforts in this life and blessing in the next.

"He is right, your father. It's a blessing to reduce your brothers' and sisters' suffering. So, he doesn't want you to continue with the shop?"

"He says he will rent it out when he wants to retire. But I'm not sure what I want to do yet."

"You'll find your way."

"Why did you choose to work in a mosque?" I asked.

"The only way I could stay true to myself and my beliefs was to leave the Qom Seminary and become financially independent," he said. The dominant belief in the seminary was that philosophy was the mother of heresy. Moreover, the high-ranked clergy followed the doctrine of non-political Islam. All these dissensions put him in a difficult position. Whereas in his self-

imposed exile, and away from that smothering environment, he could keep his morale up and focus on writing on political Islam, as was his lifelong ambition. He let me go through his notes, stored on his study table. I found the jargon difficult to comprehend and lost interest quickly.

At one point, I asked him if I could browse his library. I leafed through a few books before I picked *The republic* from a pile of books at a corner near the study table.

"That's a really interesting book," he said.

That night my long-lasting obsession with Plato started. In a few months, I had read *The republic* a few times. I was fascinated with the concept of utopia formalised by Plato and above all with the notion of the philosopher king, the rule of the wisest.

*

I talked to Entezari almost every day and visited his house regularly.

"When my youngest was born with Down's syndrome I was heartbroken at first," he said once.

He thought he had been punished for not being thankful enough for the three healthy daughters God had blessed him with. For insisting on having a son, ignorant of the fact that even the Prophet, peace be upon him, had only one daughter, Fatima, and she brought him more blessing than any son could do.

One morning, his daughter woke early and started strolling the streets in her sleeping clothes. People spotted her, running around, laughing and playing with her imaginary friends. For a while, whenever they were on the street, he noticed smirks and long stares, to which she responded with her naive smile. That pushed him to overcome his doubts. He left the Qom Seminary and moved to Tehran.

"But it's all good now and I feel blessed having her in my life," he said.

"She is lucky to have you as her father."

He smiled. “You’re like the son I’ve never had,” he responded.

It was because of the feeling of intimacy born at that moment that I asked him about his past life.

“The story of my life doesn't matter, my son,” he said.

“I” was there to be eventually dissolved into “Him”. This was not achievable without comprehensive self-denial, without discipline. Talking about oneself was not only pointless, but it could also harm the process of one’s spiritual cultivation. Nonetheless, since I had asked him, he told me that he was born in Arak, lost his father at the age of thirteen, and moved to Qom to further his theological studies when just a teenager. It was in Qom Seminary that he met one of the most interesting Islamic thinkers of our time. He promised to tell me about him another day. Now he needed to get ready to go to bed.

I still wanted to chat. But I knew that the imam was a man of habit who followed a strict routine. I said goodbye and left.

*

I heard the name of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, years before he was a national figure. Khomeini was one of the scholars at Madrasah Faizieh, where Entezari was a student and later an instructor. Entezari was mesmerised by his charismatic personality, his exceptional knowledge of religion, and his ascetic lifestyle. However, it was for his vision that Entezari set Khomeini apart from the other instructors. Khomeini envisioned a state that was run based on the Islamic laws. At the time when most clergy, including the head of the Madrasah, Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, believed that clerics should refrain from politics, Khomeini believed that politics was at the heart of Islam. He shared his vision of the Islamic state with his students and with same-minded instructors. Nonetheless, he never got involved in politics directly, partly out of respect for his master Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi.

That day, the imam, the most reserved man I had ever met, who would seldom say a word unless he was spoken to, was speaking incessantly with a smile on his face, his eyes glowing at times with the thrill of it. In the 1890s, when Nasir al-Din Shah passed the monopoly over tobacco to the British, Grand Ayatollah Shirazi had brought both the Shah and the British to their knees simply by declaring that using tobacco was *haram* for Muslims. A few words from a *mujtahid* had ended that humiliating agreement.

"What does this story teach you?" he asked.

"People trust and follow their religious leaders."

It showed with whom the real power resided in our society. Islam was not just about some ethical and spiritual problems but about real contemporary issues. "Our religion and politics are entangled with each other," he concluded.

*

My love for ancient Greek philosophers, with Plato on top of the list, and great Islamic mystics and Sufis like Rumi grew during this period. When I finished reading *The republic* for the first time, I was so excited that I went straight to Entezari's house, even though it was late for such a visit. When he opened the door, I told him that I had come to return the book. He could tell that I was eager to talk and asked me to come in with a smile.

Entezari considered Plato to be one of the most religious people who had ever lived, in the true sense of the word. For instance, what Plato said about "the vision of the form of the good" was nothing but a religious experience: a kind of knowledge one could achieve intuitively, but could not communicate. Similar to Islamic mysticism when one experienced God's cosmic presence. Great mystics had tried to convey the experience through poetry, but words were always too limited, too feeble, to contain such magnificent encounters.

"I haven't thought of Plato that way," I said as I skimmed through *The republic*, as if that could help me to get the point I had missed.

Entezari believed Plato was also very compatible with the Islamic worldview. For instance, his idea about two realms of reality—one the changeable world people lived in, and the other the realm of absolutes—or when he talked about the guardian. The Prophet, peace be upon him, and the twelve infallible Imams were good examples of Islamic guardians. What he admired about Plato was that he gave the idea of the guardian and the rule of the wisest a rational ground. We were Muslims and our wisest, besides all other necessary traits, must have had mastery of different aspects of Islam. So during the time of the Hidden Imam, the guardian must be a *mujtahid*.

"And what are ordinary people like us expected to do?" I asked, and put *The republic* on his desk.

In a society ruled by the *mujtahid*, if everyone performed their duty we would reach unity; the biggest disaster a society can be stricken by is disunity. Moreover, the Quran and the tradition of the Prophet could help us to keep the balance between our physical desire, ambition, and intellect.

"You can keep the book." He slid *The republic* back towards me. "I have another copy."

At times during our talks and discussions, I experienced a feeling that was the highest reward of any intellectual endeavor, that ephemeral and intense experience that kept me coming back for more: *joy*.

*

When Forugh was away, I was absorbed by the imam's words. I had also introduced elements of an ascetic life to my daily routines. Instead of sleeping on a mattress, I was sleeping on a thin *doshak.* I woke up in the middle of the night to pray and read Quran, before going to mosque for the morning prayer. I reduced my food intake and fasted every Friday. Every day I was reading philosophy and mystic poetry, interpreting the Quran and other religious texts. I

did not have much time left to study or to help my father at the shop anymore. My father was growing concerned.

"You need to take your study more seriously. It's good that you care about your religion, but everything in moderation, my son," he kept telling me, and I kept ignoring him.

One day when I was waiting at the mosque entrance to go back to Entezari's house for an hour of talk and discussion, he told me it would be better if I spent more time on my own study and gave my father a hand at the shop. I knew straight away that my father had spoken to him.

"Sure. I will," I said. I went back home and raised hell. I was shouting at the top of my lungs, telling my father that if he did not want to encourage me to grow intellectually and spiritually, at least he should not stop me. I even went as far as telling him that he did not know much about the true Islam.

"I know this much, that in the Quran we're asked to respect our parents right after we're asked to worship Allah," he said without raising his voice. He had got me. I had nothing to say and went back to my room.

After that, I began seeing Entezari less often, but I did not change my routine. I felt so transformed that I thought the curse had left. My body was not much of a burden anymore. It was light, disciplined, and I felt strong in its weakness. Then Forugh came back from her trip, and when she returned, so did my restlessness.

*

Forugh moved out of her father's house to one of her girlfriends' apartments. Two single women living together was unconventional enough to get my sisters talking. After learning of her whereabouts, I always hung around the area, in bookshops, cafes, and parks.

One day, tired of my aimless strolls, I was leaning against a tree on a small patch of green in front of the local library, reading *The republic* again. When one is in love with certain ideas, there is nothing more satisfying than having them approved of repeatedly. Moreover, I carried

it around as a way of defying the voice in my head that blamed me for believing in the importance of knowledge and discipline and then wasting my time loitering about, desperate for a glance of a woman.

That day, I was reading the segment on how art must serve the social order, and based on that argument I was evaluating Forugh's poetry—those poems that I could recite word by word—as worthless when I saw her on the opposite side of the street. Her silky purple skirt proved all that feeling of ascendency and control to be nothing but a delusion that was knocked out of me with every step I took to follow her. She entered a cafe and sat at a table in a corner facing the street. I stayed across the street, where I could see her profile. She put her handbag on the table, had a brief chat with the waiter, and sat staring right straight ahead.

It was not long before Parviz entered the cafe and sat next to her. Their body gestures grew tenser as they talked themselves into a quarrel. Were they arguing over their son? That seemed the most plausible explanation. Forugh had left him with her mother-in-law before her trip to Europe, and now she refused to let her see him: the only time that I had heard my mother disagree with my sisters, who thought Forugh was too "unstable" to be trusted with raising a kid. "She is still a mother and should not be kicked out of her kid's life. It's bad for the kid!" my mother had said.

Forugh thumped the table with her fist; Parviz pushed his chair back, got on his feet, hesitated to say something as he threw some money on the table, and left.

She sat there with her head down. I walked away. After a few metres, I turned and looked back. She was still there in the same posture. I realised that I did not have *The republic* with me. I found it next to the tree that I had been reading under its shade. I must have forgotten it when I put it down to tuck in my shirt before following her.

When Forugh was in Europe, her third collection was published. I had promised myself not to read it. But that day, after finding *The republic*, I went straight to a bookshop and bought *Rebellion*. I sat on a bench outside the shop and did not move until I finished it. In the poems of the collection she had questioned God's justice and pictured Satan as a servant who had no choice but to fulfil his obscene role. I found the whimsical and at times wicked God was portrayed in a manner offensive to my beliefs. It was after reading that collection that I tried to write a poem in which I would represent the true face of God. The Almighty, The Just, and The Merciful.

After a few weeks, I did not need a second opinion to know that I had failed. However, unable to acknowledge my literary incompetence, I continued writing poems, which were nothing but third-rate copies of great classics. My failure in creating any decent poetry added another feeling to the peculiar collection of sentiments I had for her: *jealousy*.

*

I saw her again a couple of weeks later—on one of those nights that I could not sleep. Staring at the ceiling in the dark, my body was strangling my soul, and nothing—no prayers, no poetry, no mental games—could weaken its grasp. I got out of bed and tiptoed out of the house. A still night. Clear sky. The city was asleep, ignorant of my anxious steps, sweaty body, and restive mind.

I was passing by the alley behind our street when I saw a silhouette leaning against a tree, dimly lit by the streetlamp near Forugh's in-laws' house. I turned into the alley. It was Forugh, with a half-drunk bottle of vodka in her hand. Her face was ruddy, and her hair, half tied and half loose, had settled on her left cheek. She raised her head, looked at me, and took another sip. I did not know how to react and stood there in silence. She started murmuring incomprehensible words. Then she fell silent with her left hand in her lap and her right on the ground holding the bottle. She let go of the bottle—the sound of its landing pierced the silent

night and startled me—and raised her right hand towards me. I stared at her hand hanging in the air, waiting for me to grab it and pull her onto her feet. A shiver took over my body. I turned and ran. *I should go to her parents' house and let them know. They'll know what to do.* Before turning out of the alley, I took one final glance over my shoulder. She was lying on the ground now, her thighs drawn up to her torso, her face resting on her arm.

I stood in front of her parents' house. A mixture of fear and shame stopped me from knocking on the door. I went back home and lay in bed, unable to get rid of the image of the trembling hand hanging in the air, and soon it was not asking for help anymore but pointing at me, accusing me of being a coward.

*

"I'm tired and a bit hungry," my father said.

"I can cook something. Or would you prefer to eat outside?"

"Let's stay in and eat something simple. I can take a rest afterwards and you can go to your teaching sessions."

"I can cancel them."

"We can continue tomorrow."

"I talked to Ellie this morning. She said she can't wait to meet you."

"Are you planning to get married?"

"We haven't talked about it yet."

"I've always respected your choices. I said nothing when you stopped praying and fasting, when you decided to leave the country; even now, I rather understand your decision on not eating meat. But now you might marry someone with whom you need to communicate in a language other than your mother-tongue. Sometimes I wonder how much…"

He paused and I completed his sentence for him. “How much of my heritage is left in me? How much of my identity?” He kept quiet. “There is no such a thing as a uniform identity. And it’s just too complex to be reduced to a few romantic notions—”

“I understand. At least, I’m trying to. Now I need to close my eyes for a while.”

“Just one last thing. Are you still writing poetry?”

“I have not written a single word in years. I chose not to be a phoney poet, which ultimately turned to be my best achievement when it comes to poetry.”

I left for work earlier than I should have. I was relieved to be out of the house. After everything I had heard, I felt comfortable around my father only when he talked; when there was no silence to give rise to questions, to uneasy thoughts.

I had mixed feelings. There were moments I thought my father had no right to appear, unfold all these stories to unburden himself, and disappear again, when we had never had this tradition of talking about our personal affairs or feelings. We had never talked about adolescence or sex. He was breaking a thirty-three-year-old agreement based on silence and denial: no talking when it came to desires. At the same time, I could not wait to hear more. To see more of this new face forming in front of me, coming out of the shadows, no matter how uncomfortable the whole process made me.

I could not concentrate and made all sorts of mistakes until my student asked whether I was alright or not. I finished my session, but did not go back home straightaway. I walked to a cafe and ordered a pot of ginger tea. I picked the novel *Disgrace* out of my backpack to read, but I gave up in a minute. I called Ellie. She asked if I was having a good time with my father and checked to make sure that I had taken him to all the touristy places. I tried to change the subject and asked how her work was. She had to bring some work back to her hotel room and she was not happy about it. She talked, complained, nagged, and I happily listened.

“Would you tell me something you’ve never told anyone else?” I asked finally. (Wasn’t it why I had called her in the first place?)

“What do you mean?”

“I mean something you’ve kept to yourself all these years. Would you share it with me?”

“I don’t know if I have such a thing to start with.”

“Of course you have. Everybody has.”

“I’m tired, honey. Maybe we could talk about it next time.”

I ambled around the city for another two hours and bought some groceries that I did not need. I considered going to a cinema, but I decided against it. I could not leave my father alone until midnight. When I reached home it was not even 9:00 pm, but he was already in bed. That was a relief. Trying not to make any noise, I lay down on the sofa.

Chapter Four

I woke up and saw my father sitting on the balcony, a cup of tea at his side and a *Diwan of Hafez* in his right hand, the one I had brought with me when I left home, a gift from Hamid. We did not say much during the morning, except that I asked him how he wanted his eggs, and for tea, black or green? I have dreamt nonstop. I could only recall bits and pieces of the dreams, but they were so intense they had left me exhausted.

I took a shower and then walked around the apartment doing unnecessary chores, waiting for him to continue with his story. He felt my impatience and said, "I need to go for a walk and clear my head. Do you have any teaching today?"

"No."

"Maybe we can go to the Botanic Gardens that you told me about."

I packed some food and we left.

"Do you like it here?" he asked me on the way.

"I don't hate it."

"Maybe you were meant to leave."

"What do you mean?"

"When you were trying to get your military exemption I hoped that you couldn't."

"Really?" I stopped and turned to him. His words had startled me. "Even though I felt miserable and was desperate to leave?"

"I thought if you didn't get exempted, after two years of military service you'd forget about leaving altogether."

"You were rooting for me not to get exempted, even though you told me once that you *truly* despised your own military service? What happened to '*All that matters is your happiness*'?"

*

I was in my last year of high school, a couple of months before I was about to enlist for military service, when Vahid, my father's cousin, came to stay with us temporarily. His father had sponsored him to study medicine in France, and when it had turned out that for all these years Vahid had been studying sociology instead, his father cut his funding. He worked in a restaurant for a few months and got his masters degree. His initial plan was to do a Ph.D.; he even received a scholarship for it, but then he decided to come back. He could be more useful in his own country, he believed.

My father let him stay in the small unit we had in our yard—which was nothing more than a room, a tiny kitchen, and a bathroom attached to it—until he could find a job and get on his feet. My mother did not like the idea. My father did not want to hear about it.

Everything about Vahid was different—the way he talked, carried himself, and even held his cigarettes—and because of that, I was both drawn to him and intimidated by him. It took me more than two weeks before I could collect all my courage and knock on his door. He was sitting at his table and a book in a foreign language was open in front of him.

"I wanted to say hi."

"*Génial*! It can get quite lonely here."

We talked about his time abroad. What did he like most about France? How was the university? What was sociology about? Why had he chosen to study sociology over medicine? I wanted to bring up Forugh's name as casually as possible. I had come to his room to learn if he had read her poetry—what he thought about it, and about her. But I was afraid that if I uttered her name something in my eyes, an uncontrollable jerk of a muscle in my face, would reveal my secret. Moreover, listening to him talk so eloquently, using big words I did not even know the meaning of, I didn't want to look stupid talking about the poetry of a poet that—controversy aside—no one took seriously.

I also had another reason to be there. Reading the books I was borrowing from Entezari had awakened a thirst in me. I was restless to learn and, more importantly, to prove—to myself more than anyone else—that my religious worldview was superior to all there was. How many well-educated people, with a degree from an excellent university in Europe, did I know? Nothing could be as reassuring as the approval of someone like him.

"Don't you think returning to our Islamic roots could solve our social issues?" I asked at some point. He knew that the idea had its own supporters, but he found it naive.

"You're a Muslim, right?" I asked.

"I don't consider myself one."

"But you believe in God?"

"Nah. I believe in human beings! In flesh and blood! And in their suffering!"

I could not say anything. What I had heard was like a punch that knocked all of the words out of my mouth.

*

For a while, I found it difficult to face Vahid again. Not because he was against everything I believed in, but because he had expressed it as if it was not a big deal. No question, no argument, no doubt, nothing but a cold-hearted "no". He had noticed my disappointment in him, as one day when he saw me in the yard, he said straightaway, "I'm not a believer myself. But I think that some new religious interpretation might help the process of modernisation in Iran. Do you want to come over for a cup of tea?"

I was about to leave the house for the evening prayers at the mosque. "Yes," I said anyway. I would pray later at home. The mere fact that he had tried to make me feel better meant a lot to me.

From that day onward I saw him more often. I mostly listened to him talk without uttering a word, as I was intimidated into silence by his apparent intellect. What was a Hegelian take

on history? How was it different from Marx's? Who was Schopenhauer? How could I be "will to power" and nothing else? What did that even mean? Was morality relative? What was Special Relativity? It sounded too complicated, but I needed to understand it. Vahid believed that Special Relativity was pointing towards moral relativism and I needed a good understanding of both theories to defend my stance. There was no end to either my questions or my confusion.

One night when he was talking about a French poet, I seized the opportunity and asked, as casually as possible, whether he has read any of Forugh's works. He had read a couple and he had even met her a few times at Cafe Naderi where he hung out with his friends on Thursdays.

"With so many great poets, both classic and contemporary, why are you interested in her?" he asked.

I was not interested in her. I had not even read her works. I knew her because she used to live down the street. I had just heard people talking about her, and I was wondering what all the fuss was about?

Vahid claimed that people talked about her poetry because its topics were controversial—because as naive as she was, she had chosen to appear naked in front of the reader. In terms of concept and form she had nothing to offer.

"Did you know she was using *iconoclast* as her pseudonym when she had just started writing poetry? The ego behind that choice!"

I kept quiet. I did not know what ego meant.

"Don't get me wrong," Vahid said. He was all for women's empowerment. One could not exclude women if one wished for a modern and prosperous society. He admired nothing more than an independent woman. He was in love with one once. But women like Forugh were nothing but Westernised dolls. They had neither the purity of our mothers nor the intelligence of the modern women in the West. Full of contradiction and confusion.

"You were in love?" I asked. "With whom?"

"You only got that from all I said?" he said with a smirk.

"I was just curious. Sorry."

"Don't be. Nothing is worth our curiosity more than love. She was a French girl in my class. I asked her out and she said no. And about Forugh's poetry. I'm going to tell you something that I haven't told anyone."

He was with a woman for the first time when he had just moved to France. She was a prostitute. After she left, he woke up in the middle of the night with her body odour in his nose. It was not only on his body. The room was filled with it. He opened the window. The cold air rushed in. He waited until he was shivering but the smell was still there. He ran into the bathroom and rubbed his skin for an hour or so before he was convinced that the smell was gone. The day after, he had a fever. He recovered quickly from the cold but the gloom stayed with him for a while. There was something sad about her, about the way she counted the money, about her scarlet cheeks, about how she said he could call her any time, that he was a gentleman, about the fact that he could not bring himself to say a nice word to her and could not wait for her to leave.

"You know, if that prostitute wanted to write poetry it would turn out like Forugh's." He lit a cigarette, took a long drag, and looked at me. "That's how I feel about her poetry."

*

One Thursday, I asked Vahid if I could join him and his friends at Cafe Naderi.

"Sure, but it's at sunset," he said, with his usual smirk that said *I am smart and mischievous, and I know it*. He had pointed out that I was going to miss the early congregational prayers if I joined them.

"Doesn't matter," I said, and averted my gaze.

Vahid introduced me to the group of people sitting around the table. Forugh was not among them. *She may show up later*, I thought. She did not. Despite my first disappointing experience, I attended those meetings every Thursday. I was not interested in their discussions. Most of them were inclined towards leftist ideas that I had no sympathy for; some of them were even active members of the communist Tudeh Party before it was announced that it was illegal and dissolved by the Shah. They mostly talked about contemporary politics, and at times, literature and arts. I had started thinking that the whole thing was just a waste of time when I finally met Forugh.

One of the people who frequented the cafe was Nader Naderpur, a respected contemporary poet. Vahid knew him from his time in France when Nader was doing a bachelor's degree in French literature. That day Nader had just finished reading one of his latest poems when he suddenly collected his stuff to leave. Vahid turned and looked at the entrance. I did the same. Forugh was coming in, at her side a man I had never seen before.

"You can't leave whenever she appears," Vahid whispered.

"I'm already late for my date with my fiancée," Nader said.

Forugh arrived at the table. "Are you going to wash your hands? Eat once with your hands unwashed, something good may come out of it," she said with a grin. Nader just nodded and left.

"How is the great poet doing?" Vahid asked Forugh.

"I know you are being sarcastic, and I don't care. I'm not a great poet, but I'm also not embarrassed at what I'm trying to achieve, since I take poetry as a serious business."

"Then how come nothing that really matters is reflected in this serious business of yours?" Vahid asked, and glanced around the table with his usual smirk, as if waiting for a round of applause. The country had been going through serious changes and turmoil. As a nation, we were facing many major sociopolitical issues, none of which was reflected in her poetry.

“I only write about things that I know. I cannot fake interest in something just because it is the fashion of the day. No real artist should do that!”

“Nima is your favourite poet, right? But—”

“I like him because he is genuine,” Forugh interrupted. When she read his poetry, she felt as if she was dealing with a human being, not a collection of superficial emotions or ideas. There was complexity behind his apparent simplicity, and one could encounter all the important and dark questions of life in his poetry.

“But he was a very socially conscious poet. I personally don’t see that in your poetry,” Vahid said as he slurped his tea.

“The whole process of creation must be organic,” Forugh answered. She had read good poets who wrote about what people like Vahid considered important issues of the day, but they did not sound genuine, because they were passionate about those topics, but without having immersed themselves and their lives in them. They had no real understanding of the themes of their creations. “You can’t write about something just because you’re fond of it.”

“You have to accept that—”

“Let me finish!” she raised her voice. “There are some other poets, some of them very talented, who write just to be praised—one of them has just left—and this will ruin them as artists in the long run. A poet should not care about what her audience or critics are thinking when she writes poetry! She should drag them along as she grows and she cannot and must not create according to their likings and expectations.”

“Wait a minute here,” Vahid said, agitated, his smirk long gone. “So an artist should not care about what is happening around him?”

The discussion went on for another hour. I sat there in silence, looking at her talking about poetry as if her life depended on it, memorising every detail of her face, every hand gesture, every tiny movement.

*

"*Putain*!" Vahid said on the way back.

"What?" I asked. He did not respond. "Who was the man sitting next to Forugh?"

"One of her lovers, I guess."

"What's Nader's business with Forugh?"

Apparently Nader was with Forugh for a while. He had a family farm near Tehran where he and Forugh hung out. Vahid joined them too—only when Nader insisted and he couldn't come up with an excuse to get out of it. More often than not, Forugh read her poems to Nader and he corrected them for her. Nader was the one who had turned some of her poems into something readable.

Vahid stopped to light a cigarette. "I'm happy for Nader. He is getting married soon."

"Why did they break up?"

"Not sure. But I know that he dodged a bullet there. Have you read any of his poetry? It's quite good. Not like Forugh's, the gist of which is using sex for fame."

Vahid started citing one of Nader's poems called "The old sculptor". I was just nodding my head without paying any attention when he suddenly said, "Why do you like her anyway?" His smirk was not the usual one, this time it was crooked and sulky.

"Who?"

"Forugh! Who else?" he said with a look both condescending and resentful.

"I don't like her!"

"*Allez*! It was so obvious, the way you were looking at her and all."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said. "I'm going to the mosque." We were passing by a mosque I had never been to. The time for congregational prayer had passed, but I could still pray alone, and get rid of Vahid and his smirk.

I stopped going to the Thursday meetings.

*

For another month, though, I still visited the cafe. I sat at a small table at the beginning of a narrow hallway to the bathroom, almost hidden behind the counter. I ordered a tea and read a book. I seldom managed to read more than a couple of pages with my senses engaged in looking for any trace of her.

During one of those random visits to the cafe, I saw Nader sitting alone at a table, and every now and then jotting a few words on a notebook. To reach my usual spot, I passed behind him, trying not to attract his attention. Forugh's last collection, *Rebellion,* was on top of the pile of books in front of him. The waiter came to his table, took his glass, refilled it, and brought it back. Nader pushed his chair back and I hid my face behind my book as he walked towards the washroom.

I walked to his table and sat down. I had met him a few times and even if he saw me, I could remind him I was Vahid's cousin and had come over for a chat, to tell him how much I admired his poetry. Unfortunately, I did not have his collection with me, but could he sign the book I had with me? What was my favourite poem? "The old sculptor".

I opened *Rebellion,* "For my dear Nader, Your Forugh", read the first page. A gust of jealousy twitched my stomach and found its way to my throat. I had seen his friends teasing him for being a germaphobe. I picked up his glass, and while taking a sip, spun it in my hand over my lips to make sure my saliva was all over the edge. I took *Rebellion* and left.

I threw the book in the first rubbish bin I passed by after looking at her handwriting one last time. I was a practicing Muslim. And I had just stolen from, and basically fed my saliva to, another Muslim. *He is not a Muslim! I bet he even looks down on all the Muslims. He is not my brother! He is a playboy who takes advantage of vulnerable women!*

After that, I controlled the almost irresistible urge to visit the cafe—to just pass by it, to only have a look inside—for another three weeks, until I left Tehran for Kermanshah where I was dispatched for my military service.

*

Over the next two years, I seldom spent any time in Tehran and returned only when I had leave. After the physical difficulties of military training ended, I still found the rest of my service mentally challenging. I did not want to serve the Shah, whom I considered an illegitimate sovereign. I always thought of rebelling when I received a command, but I never did anything like that, no matter how infuriated I felt at times. I took solace in the thought that even though the Shah was the commander-in-chief I was serving my country, not him.

I did not see Forugh during those two years, but I followed her work. I always bought *Arash*, one of the newly established literary journals. It usually had a poem or two of hers, and sometimes even an interview. I realised that because of some of her newly published poems, critics had started taking her more seriously. Deep inside, I did not like that.

I also heard about her from Vahid, who continued living in our house and visited Cafe Naderi on a regular basis. He mentioned Forugh every time he saw me, even though it made me obviously uncomfortable.

"This Forugh of yours, damn! She is crazy," Vahid said the first time I was back home. He told me how they were at a party, and she was drinking vodka like water, contradicting everyone and everything. Suddenly she moved to the other corner of the living room where Mostafa, one of Vahid's friends, was smoking opium. Everybody fell silent, wondering what she was doing, towering over his head like that. Mostafa turned his head, wondering why everyone was suddenly quiet, and then she started telling him how insignificant a poet, and how pathetic a person, he was. "You should have seen the look of shock on his face. She didn't stop until she ruined the party. Apparently, she does shit like that all the time!"

"Forugh has got a job at the *Ferdowsi* magazine, through her friend who is in charge of the magazine's poetry section," Vahid told me the second time I was back. "And do you know what she did?"

"How can I know?" I said in an apathetic tone.

Forugh had gone behind her friend's back and told the editor that she could do a better job and should be in charge of the poetry section. Another time, when she was defending Forugh over something, the editor told her what Forugh had tried to pull. "Can you believe that? Now I know why I could never bring myself to like her."

Forugh had got a job at Golestan Film Studio, Vahid informed me one year into my military service. "Ibrahim Golestan, the owner of the studio, is quite a character. During the first meeting, Ibrahim tells her, '*I know you consider yourself a poet, but I've hired a secretary not an artist. You are here to do your work and to do it well. Write poetry in your own time*.' I've never met this guy, but I think I'd like him. By the way, how much more is left of your service?"

Why are you still living in our house? Don't you realise that you have overstayed your welcome? I thought every time I saw him.

*

After finishing my military service, I started working at my father's shop. He asked me if I had any plans to further my study and I said that I was not ready yet. I had started to find the mind-numbing routine of working in the shop liberating. It kept my mind too busy to wander, and my body tired so I slept peacefully at night. I craved the smell of the shop, a collection of interwoven scents that cooled my nerves: saffron, tea, dried lime, dates, cumin, rice, turmeric, pomegranate paste, dried vegetables, and above all rosewater. After so many years, the smell of the rosewater that my father wore as a perfume had found its way into the warp and woof of

the shop, to its very fabric. It smelt like life at its simplest, with no complications, high expectations, or crushing anticipation.

A few days into my return, I noticed Vahid's strange behaviour. He would disappear for a while and then I would see him coming back, mussed up and drunk, crawling to his unit as quietly as possible. I knew he was drinking sometimes, but he never came home drunk out of respect for my father. He also knew that my mother, like me, was irritated with him for prolonging his stay, and that ignoring social decorum would not work in his favour.

One early morning, when I was getting ready to go to the mosque, I saw Vahid passing the yard, too drunk to walk straight. I had not seen him for almost a week—the longest he had disappeared for. I knocked at his door. He did not reply. I knocked again. Nothing. I knocked one last time and opened the door. The whole room reeked of alcohol. He was right in the middle of the room, in a prostrate position, his forehead on a *mohr*. *Is he praying? He is drunk and he is not even facing the qiblah!* I murmured his name. He did not move. *Is he asleep?* I said, "Vahid," a bit louder. Finally, I almost shouted his name. He flicked his head and looked at me as his eyes came back from dreamland. He dragged himself towards the wall and leaned against it with the upper half of his torso.

"Are you alright?"

He nodded.

"Do you want some water?"

He nodded in rejection.

"Tea?"

I took his silence as a yes. "I'll bring it in a minute."

"I lied."

"What do you mean?"

“I lied about my study,” Vahid said. He rambled on about how he had not become a doctor because it was too difficult. The bloody language! He had learnt French for a year, but that was not enough and he could not cope with the stress. All those stupid words! He thought it almost impossible to become a physician using a foreign language. He chose social sciences because he thought that would be easier. Everything he had told me, that he chose it because of its importance and its essential role in blah blah blah, was bullshit.

“I’m so full of shit,” he sniggered. He was barely surviving doing the new major, but when he was rejected, he got so depressed that he couldn’t get out of bed. He quit. “I’m a quitter with a big mouth,” he said, looking at me like a kid caught red-handed stealing cookies. For more than a year, he was doing almost nothing, reading a book occasionally, spending his father’s money. “When I returned, those books helped me talk like I knew shit. Repeating stuff like a parrot, throwing a French word here and there. I’m so full of shit, you can’t even imagine.”

“You must’ve really loved her,” I said. He kept quiet. “Do you still have her contacts?”

“Whose contacts?”

“The French girl.”

“I didn’t care for her. I just asked her out to get over someone else.”

“Who?”

“Forugh.”

“Forugh!”

He had met her at a party while in Europe. “Based on what I’ve seen I might be the only loser she ever rejected!” He snorted. It was followed with an almost silent weeping. It made me uncomfortable, almost nauseated. I left.

I did not go to mosque. I did my prayer at home and then lay back in bed thinking about Vahid. Now I knew why he did not get a proper job when he looked more than qualified, and continued writing articles for random journals for almost nothing; why he had not moved out

yet and wore the same suits and long coats—elegant as they were—as when he had moved into our house. I fell asleep with a picture of Vahid in my mind kissing a woman with red cheeks.

Later that morning, when I was leaving for work, I paused at his door. I thought I should check on him. I changed my mind and walked away.

When I returned home in the evening I found a note on my desk reading, *I have to leave. I'm sorry*. I ran to the living room.

"Did you know Vahid has left?"

My parents looked at me in disbelief.

"What?"

"He wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

"He left a note," I said.

My mother took the note and read it aloud. "After all you did for him he didn't bother to say a proper thank you or goodbye. Some cousin you have!"

My father did not say anything.

*

No one talked about it aloud. I cannot even remember when I found out, or how. Perhaps from intangible whispers, averted gazes, angry but quiet quarrels. My father's hair growing white on his temples; hearing him cry after his morning prayers. My mother fidgeting around, cursing under her breath, eating nonstop, putting on weight faster than a pregnant woman would. Zari not talking anymore, not leaving the house, not smiling, not existing, morphing into a silent ghost. Her face growing thinner, looking old and weary, as her hands and feet became plumper and her white long floral dress grew larger and looser. And finally their silences that were turning into a discourse more informative than any speech. Zari was pregnant. Now we knew why Vahid was sorry.

*

From the day Zari's pregnancy was certain until her delivery, she was almost invisible. When family members were around, she seldom left her room. From my bedroom, I could hear her dress rustling at night. When she had not yet grown too big, she would go out with my mother occasionally. If she suddenly disappeared from the public eye, her empty place would be filled in with rumours. Once I saw my mother and Zari talking to a neighbour in front of our house. Zari was maintaining a forced smile and my mother a broad one, asking her to come in for a tea. As soon as she turned away, affability disappeared and gloom took over both faces once again. We all had one unspoken mission: to keep disgrace within the walls.

Goli did not know how to share the scandalous news with her husband, Javad. She could not let him lose respect for her and her family, and acted as if she hoped to conceal the truth forever. She had even planned a six-week pilgrimage to Karbala and Najaf for the time when Zari's belly would prove too big to conceal. When Goli and Javad came for Friday dinners, everybody was expected to behave normally. Goli acted all cheerful, with her fake smiles, fake words, fake presence. My mother chatted to Javad, fed him to the verge of exploding, and looked for words to break any silence that sounded awkward and revealing. Zari avoided eye contact with everyone except Javad, who apparently had no talent for reading the room. My father, who could not even bring himself to look at Zari (more from shame than anything else), conversed with him gracefully. I sat there full of pity for my family, who had to participate in this circus of infamy, and fantasised about beating the crap out of the biggest son of a bitch I had ever met.

The day Zari was due and we were waiting for a midwife to do the delivery at home, my mother came to the living room and whispered something into my father's ear.

"Forget the midwife. We'll take her to the hospital," my father said, rising from his chair.

"Let me get her ready," my mother replied. But Zari would not leave the house. She was alright and was going to deliver at home.

"Let me talk to her," my father said.

"Wait," my mother replied. She came back after a moment. "She doesn't want to talk to anyone."

*

Zari died during childbirth two months after her twenty-ninth birthday. It seemed like a miracle that such a demoralised body could give birth to such a healthy baby—as if she had passed all the life that she had given up on on to him. My mother lost almost all the weight she had gained, as if she was melting away. My father grew old like a character in a film skipping twenty years. Unable to cry, I was constantly enraged. One day, struggling to open the door, I punched it so hard that I broke a finger. Even the excruciating pain did not make me cry. Only at night, lying in bed, my stiff body going lax with two painkillers dissolving in my blood, did I burst into a silent sob, looking at my middle finger sticking out in its white cast.

When Goli came back from her pilgrimage, Zari had already been dead for more than a week. Javad bought the story of meningitis and cried like a baby over her grave while praying for the blessing of her soul. Her tombstone read: *The eternal sanctuary of the reverend maiden, Miss Zahra Gorgani*.

My mother called the baby boy Ali and raised him like her own, as the official story went. What are the odds that you would lose a child at the same time as you give birth to one? I am sure there were people who figured the odds out, but to our knowledge, it never went public—and that was enough.

*

"It's time to go home," my father said, the words barely making it out of his mouth.

"Just wait," I said. I needed to digest what I had heard. All these years Ali had been my cousin! How could they hide the truth from him? When my grandma died, after her burial, Ali and I had gone to Zari's grave nearby, washed it and put flowers on it. This was his sister who had died young, Ali had said, and his mother was so heartbroken that doctors recommended another pregnancy to overcome the grief and that was how he was born. I had already heard that story and only nodded. I also knew that Ali had this strange affinity with the sister he had never met, save for her pictures, and occasionally paid her grave a visit.

Sometimes it made him feel guilty that he was born because she was dead. His mother gave birth to him when she was forty-seven; maybe that was why he was a bit crazy, Ali had said with a snort, which had turned into a silent cry. He had just buried his mother, after all.

My cousin, Ali—a man who had lost two mothers.

My grandpa was gone, my Aunt Goli was ill and dying, and it meant that after my father I would be the only one who knew the truth. Why did my father tell me this? Had he just passed the responsibility of telling Ali the bitter truth or letting him live the less bitter lie on to me?

"Did you ever see Vahid again?" I asked in a whisper.

"After Zari's death we acted like he'd never existed. I heard my mother cursing him under her breath when we paid Zari's grave a visit for her fortieth-day memorial—and even then she did not mention his name. We wouldn't go to any party or gathering where his name could come up. I assumed he had left Tehran. I saw him once in Mashhad after almost thirty years, in one of the bazaars near Imam Reza Holy Shrine."

"Did he notice you?"

"Not at first," my father said. He got on his feet and looked at me with brooding eyes.

"Was he alone?" I asked, staying seated.

"He was with a middle-aged woman, I guess his wife, and two girls in their early twenties, probably his daughters. He was almost bald, with white hair over his temples, thin stubble, a

bulging stomach, and stooping shoulders. He wore a pair of brown glasses, their thick lenses accentuating the black patches under his eyes. Not much was left of the handsome fellow he once was."

"Had they come for pilgrimage? Or were they living in Mashhad?"

"I don't know."

"What did you do?"

"I never knew anger could survive for so long. But it was there, fresh. Maybe because he had scarred my soul and decades are like days in the soul's reference of time. I thought of calling his name and waiting for him to turn to slap him so hard he would lose balance, and of then turning to his daughters and saying, would you like to meet your half-brother?"

"Do you regret it? I mean, not doing anything."

"Not really. Because I did something; it was not near enough, but it was something," he said, and for a fraction of a second something dark illuminated his eyes and it scared me.

"What?"

He took a deep breath before he continued. "I was about to walk off, but I changed my mind. I turned back, overtook them, turned into a small alley and waited right at the junction until his reflection appeared in the display window of the shop opposite. I counted to three and took a step into the street and stumbled right into his left shoulder, stepping on his left foot. As hard as I could. The brown leather of his shoe crumpled under my weight, the box in his hands hit the ground and the sound of shattering glass rang through my head. He turned, his face distorted with anger. I stopped and looked right into his eyes. His scarlet face turned pale, wearing the look of someone who had lost everything in a second—a moment that kept on stretching as time slowed down. Unintelligible words were coming out of his wife and daughters' mouths, forming a buzz around us. I glanced into his eyes and frightened soul, let the hatred in my gaze settle in, and walked off. I stopped and looked back. He was squatting

on the ground, his lower back leaning against the wall, his hands hanging over his thighs, his neck tilted forward. One of the daughters was massaging his shoulders, the wife and the other daughter were towering over him and throwing angry looks and inaudible words in my direction."

My father's lips had turned pale. "Are you alright?" I asked.

He sat back next to me, and hid his face in his large wrinkled hands. "My sister! My poor lost sister," he murmured.

Chapter Five

I woke up with a hangover and a dry pungent mouth, drool dribbling down my chin. I sat at the edge of the sofa, dazed, rubbing my stiff jaw. Had I started grinding my teeth again? Last night I felt as if I had swallowed a bit of darkness, as if a spot on my heart had irreversibly turned rancid and rotten. After my father went to bed, I drank and passed out. I ran to the toilet once in the middle of the night to throw up. While hugging the toilet bowl, as my stomach unclenched, I thought it was enough. I did not want to hear any more. I did not care that he had come all this way to share, to unburden, to confess, or whatever he thought he was doing. Not knowing was as much my right as knowing. But in the morning, two aspirins, four glasses of water, and a long shower later, I changed my mind. *It cannot get any worse,* I thought naively.

I did not feel like eating and did some chores around the place as he finished his breakfast, occasionally glancing at a book left open on the table next to his plate. I had never seen him reading and eating at the same time. It spared us from making any small talk and that worked for me. Then he sat on the balcony as if reading, but after a while, when I walked to the balcony to collect the clothes hanging on a rope to dry, I saw he had not turned a page since breakfast.

He had four more days in Adelaide. When I had asked him about his short stay over the phone, he had said that he could not leave my mother alone for too long, but now I knew that it was not the whole truth. He did not want to hang around after he had finished his story. The story I did not want to hear—but I *wanted* to hear.

I could not stand another minute inside the apartment, feeling claustrophobic, as my restive mind drove me mad. I suggested going to a new beach. He nodded and got to his feet to get ready.

We ate peanut butter sandwiches, listening to the nonstop surging and breaking of the waves. Perhaps we both liked spending time on the beach, since with the thrumming ocean there was no need for words to fill in the silence. Then we walked to a sunny green patch nearby where he continued his story.

*

A few months after Zari's death I went to Golestan Studio to look for a job. Forugh was at the reception desk. I left before she could see me, walked to the nearby park, and smoked a cigarette loitering under the graceful spring sun. Then I ambled to a convenience store and bought a pack of gum; nothing could give a bad first impression like foul breath. Leaving the shop, I glanced at my reflection in the window. I could use a shave and a haircut, but before I entered the barbershop I thought, *It's either now or never*, walked back to the studio and asked to see Mr. Golestan.

"You have an appointment?" Forugh asked.

"No, but I need to see him now."

"What's your name?"

"Ismael…Ismael Gorgani."

Perhaps it was my nervous gestures and almost trembling voice that convinced Forugh to leave her desk straightaway and fetch Ibrahim.

"What do you want?" Ibrahim asked.

"I was wondering if I could get a job here."

"What kind of a job?"

"Anything."

"We don't need anyone."

"I can do anything."

"You have to try your luck somewhere else."

"I want to work *here*."

"Why here? Are you one of those people who dream of becoming an artist? Or are deluded that they are gifted?"

"I just need a job."

"Do you write poetry?"

"Sometimes. But I'm bad at it."

A half-smile appeared on his face. They had a driver, but Ibrahim reckoned I could fill in for him sometimes since he had not been feeling too well recently. "Do you mind cleaning the office too, bringing tea, sorting mail, chores like that?"

I did not. I was asked to bring my birth certificate and driver's license tomorrow so Forugh could arrange the rest. I could start for three days a week at first.

"You said it was important. Are you going to lie like this all the time?" Forugh asked.

"It was important for me to get a job," I answered.

Ibrahim chuckled. "And who knows? Maybe you're a better poet than you think."

I smiled without saying anything. Forugh turned her back on me and said something in a hushed tone.

"He's going to do some basic chores. I'm sure he can manage," Ibrahim answered without lowering his voice. He did not like to have his authority questioned about something so trivial.

I walked away.

*

The rumours about their love affair were not out yet, but when I saw Forugh and Ibrahim side by side, I knew straight away that they were more than colleagues. I was no competition for Ibrahim (or Shahi as Forugh called him). I knew it as soon as I saw him. He was good-looking, charismatic, a well-known writer and filmmaker, and one of the few who had managed to make a living out of their art at the time when most artists were struggling to cover basics. He was

also around twelve years older than Forugh, and her previous relationships showed a pattern in favour of older men. He was married with children, however, and this could make him vulnerable. *I'm going to sabotage this. I don't know how, but I'll find a way*, I thought when I left Golestan Studio for the first time.

*

Forugh felt manipulated after our first encounter and we had a rough start as colleagues. But it did not take long before she grew fond of me as a naive young man, nothing like the overconfident, tacky men or players she had been dealing with her entire life. Moreover, I never participated in office gossip, nor had any sleazy or sarcastic comments about her outfits or actions, and she never felt my gaze on her body. As I got used to her presence, the tense atmosphere started to dissolve and a sense of intimacy slowly grew between us, mainly through the silences we shared when I drove her around in the studio car. After a few months, she felt comfortable enough to read her unpublished poetry to me. Some of the poems that were soon to be published in *Another birth* or those that were to be issued posthumously in *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season*. I did not share my thoughts and listened without any comments. Perhaps this turned me into her favourite audience.

"Green delusion" was the first poem she ever read to me. Not just to me, though. It was I and an old woman who lay dying on a hospital bed. Khanum Kuchik was her mother's half-sister, who had spent almost all her life in her parents' house, doing chores like a maid.

"And now she is dying alone," Forugh said to Ibrahim. "I need to go to the hospital."

I was done for the day but Ibrahim asked whether I could drive her, so she did not have to drive while distracted and emotional. On the way to the hospital we stopped at Forugh's parental house to pick up a photo album. She thought going through pictures could be good for Khanum Kuchik's morale. She passed me one of the pictures as we were walking towards the hospital entrance. Khanum Kuchik had a stern face, dark skin, small slanted eyes, and a big

eagle nose. She was wearing an old army jacket, which despite being oversized could not fully conceal her humpy back. Forugh was looking up at her with a smile, and Khanum Kuchik's head was turning away from Forugh towards the camera, a second before she was about to look right into its lens. They were standing against a brick wall and under the shade of a grapevine heavy with clusters of grapes.

"She always wore my father's discarded army coats. Because of her hump, kids always made fun of her on the street."

"Kids can be cruel," I said. I did not mention that I was one of those kids.

"She was a great storyteller. You should've listened to her citing stories from *Shahnameh*. No matter how tired she was, she would never say no to me when I asked for a story."

Khanum Kuchik was lying on the bed under a white sheet, unconscious; only her face, her grey hair spreading over the white pillow, and her left hand and withered elbow were visible. Her body looked like a fruit that had had its juice sucked out. Now that life was finally leaving her alone, everything about her—every joint, muscle and wrinkle—was relaxed and at peace with the coming death. She reminded me of my grandmother on her deathbed. Observing death, even in its most peaceful form, made me uncomfortable.

"I'll be back," I said. I smoked a cigarette, bought two chicken sandwiches from a fast food joint near the hospital, and ambled along a green path eating my sandwich before going back. When I entered the room Forugh was holding Khanum Kuchik's hand and narrating the famous story of the legendary Rostam and his son, Sohrab, at the point where they were facing each other on the battlefield, ignorant of the cruel fate that awaited them. Young and naive Sohrab had just dominated Rostam, and he was tricking his way out of his predicament by telling Sohrab that a man with real valour had to prevail over his opponent three times before he had the right to shed his blood. I waited there in silence and let Rostam fatally wound Sohrab,

discover his real identity from his wristband and try to save his son's life to no avail for the millionth time. *How does it feel to be stuck in such a tragic story forever?* I thought.

"You are back!" Forugh said as she turned to me.

"I didn't want to interrupt."

"This was her favourite story. Isn't it interesting that in our myths, it is the father who eventually kills the son?"

"I've got you a sandwich in case you're staying overnight," I said.

"That's very kind of you, Ismael," Forugh said. "When I was a teenager, Khanum Kuchik really enjoyed it when I read my poetry to her. For her it must have been more about the feeling of intimacy, about being part of the family, than anything else."

She asked me to leave any time I wished and took a small notebook out of her bag. "This is not complete yet." She was talking to Khanum Kuchik now. "But I think you'll like it. You never liked a story with a happy ending."

The whole day, I was crying in the mirror
Spring had passed my window
to the trees' green delusion.
My body would not fit into my cocoon of loneliness
and the odour of my paper crown
had polluted the air of that sunless realm
I couldn't, I just couldn't anymore…
The whole day my gaze
was staring into my life's eyes
into those anxious frightened eyes
who were evading my fixed gaze

and like liars,

were taking asylum in the safe reclusion of eyelids.

Which summit, which peak?

Aren't all these winding roads

ceasing to exist in that cold sucking mouth?

What did you give me,

o you words, you deceivers of the credulous,

o you the abstinence of flesh and desires?

If I put a flower in my hair,

wouldn't that be more enticing than

this fraud, than this paper crown,

which has rotted on the top of my head?

How the desert's spirit captured me,

and the charm of the moon distanced me

from the faith of the herd?…

Give me asylum, o, simple whole women

whose slender fingers, from above the skin,

trace the delightful movement of a fetus,

and in whose collar the air is always fused

with the aroma of fresh milk….

I couldn't, I couldn't anymore.

I go to the veranda and caress

with my fingers the taut skin of the night.

The lights of intimacy are dark,

The lights of intimacy are dark.

No one will introduce me to the sunlight,

no one will take me to the sparrows' banquet.

Commit flight to memory,

the bird is mortal.

I left the hospital and drove to the house of one of my friends who was a calligrapher. "Could you write something for me?" I asked.

"Right now?"

"Yeah. It's just one line."

"Come on in then. What's the line?"

"*Commit flight to memory, the bird is mortal*."

The day after was a Friday and the studio was closed. On Saturday morning Forugh did not show up at work. "She has gone to a funeral," somebody told me.

*

I was jealous of, and at the same time impressed by, how her poetry had evolved. It was not fair. It was not fair to live a decadent life and then write poetry like that. I still could not find any word to describe that "that".

I concealed my jealousy, but my admiration showed itself in the eye contact I avoided, occasional simple praises expressed in my most reserved tone, and in the moments of astonishment my silence could not hide.

No one thinks about the flowers

no one thinks about the fish

no one wants to believe

that the garden is dying,

that the garden's heart has swollen under the sun

that the garden's mind is getting empty

of green memories ever so slowly,

and the garden's emotion is like something abstract

that has rotten in the garden's seclusion…

My brother calls the garden a graveyard,

my brother laughs at the confusion of greenery

and counts the fish corpses which

are turning into rotten particles

under the water's sick skin.

My brother is addicted to philosophy,

for my brother the garden's healing

lies in its destruction.

He gets drunk

and punches walls and doors

and tries to tell that

he is extremely agonised and weary and disheartened.

He takes his despair

like his ID card and calendar and handkerchief and lighter and pen

to the street and bazaar.

And his despair is so small

that every night it disappears

in the hustle and bustle of the bar…

When she finished the poem, I had a comment beyond my usual reserve for the first time. “What is wrong with philosophy?”

“Nothing. If it comes out of a genuine mouth. If it’s not simply a bunch of empty words. If it’s not like some idiot who tries to plant tropical fruits in Europe,” she said.

Twelve years after her death, when the Revolution had conquered the streets of a country that had been described as “an island of stability in one of the most troubled areas of the world” just a few months earlier by Jimmy Carter, the U.S. president, I found myself reciting another segment of the same poem—“I Feel Pity for the Garden”.

The whole day
there it comes from behind the door,
the sound of smashing
and explosion.
All our neighbours
—rather than flowers—
plant machine-guns and bombshells
in their gardens.
All our neighbours
blanket their tiled ponds,
which are unwittingly
the secret depository of gun-powder.
And kids of our neighbourhood
have filled their schoolbags
with small bombs…

That was when I finally found the word I was looking for. Like “that” was to write like a prophet. And she was not just an oracle who foresaw the future of her society when everybody else failed to do so. She was also a prophet of worldly love.

I’m not talking about the frail union of two names
and lovemaking in the old pages of a registry.
I’m talking about my fortunate hair
with the burnt anemones of your kisses
and amity of our bodies, in gaiety
and the gleam of our nakedness
like fish scales in water…

That was the irony of my life. I was enamored with the prophet of love and obsessed with the philosopher of death.

*

My father had this musty brownish wooden frame in his study with the line he had just recited in it: *Commit flight to memory, the bird is mortal*. It had never crossed my mind that there could be such a story behind it. The lines my father had recited were a mix of two different poems. Had she later decided to publish them separately? Or was that simply how my father remembered it?

Chapter Six

Working in the studio broadened my social life. I was invited to parties that were not like any social gatherings I had seen before, which I attended to be near Forugh. Otherwise, I felt uncomfortable being surrounded by people with whom I felt no connection either intellectually or politically. Like the Thursday gatherings at Cafe Naderi, most people at those parties were leftist artists and thinkers who supported the communist Tudeh Party (when it was active) or at least had sympathy for it. Moreover, I found all the drinking, sexy dresses, and nonstop flirting offensive to my beliefs. I usually held a glass of water with ice in my hand. That stopped people from offering me drinks and spared me explaining that I did not drink alcohol, which could evoke judgmental looks or sarcastic comments.

It was at a party, I cannot recall its occasion, when I met Ibrahim's family for the first time. Fakhri (his wife), Lili (his daughter), and Kaveh (his son). I noticed that Lili, who was around nineteen or twenty, was not comfortable with being in the same room as Forugh, whereas her mother, Fakhri, tried to act as gracefully as possible around her. Strangely enough, there was a mutual fondness between Forugh and Kaveh. I could tell from their gestures and cheerful faces that they were having a friendly conversation standing together next to an apple tree shaded white and pink with its blossoms. *A teenager has no problem with talking to a beautiful young woman even if she is his father's lover*, I thought.

I was sitting alone on a table near a small fountain when I saw two men join Forugh and Kaveh. After a while, the friendly conversation turned into an intense argument. I left my table to listen.

"I've seen your house," said the older man to Forugh, "you live in a place like that and still call *us* bourgeois?"

“Being bourgeois is not about what you have or don’t have, it’s about how you behave and think and—”

The younger man interrupted her by reaching for the label on her new coat, pulling it off and placing it in her palm, saying sarcastically, “Here you go! I removed your bourgeois label! Now you belong to the proletariat.”

Forugh, tipsy from alcohol, walked briskly towards the house crying aloud, “Can you believe these idiots? They say they have removed my bourgeois label!” waving the label in her hand. The younger man looked at Kaveh and said, “It must be difficult to be around her, to make small talk and pretend nothing is the matter.”

“It’s a simple love affair. Don’t try to turn it into something dirty. And I don’t have to do anything. I am talking to her because I want to,” Kaveh said, and walked off.

Almost four decades later—when Kaveh had become a prominent journalist and photographer—I read about his death from a landmine near Kifri in Iraq, just a few hours after he had said to his colleague, “When I'm in situations like these, I feel I am me.” It made me wonder if his relationship with Forugh was more than a teenager enjoying the company of an attractive woman; maybe they felt comfortable in each other’s presence because Forugh was a restless artist and Kaveh was on his way to becoming one.

I could still hear the young man talking about bourgeois and proletariat in an assertive, self-assured tone that made me irritated. I walked towards him and turned my head to the left, pretending not to see him, before bumping into him and sending his scarlet drink all over his white shirt.

“What the hell!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, as insincere as possible, and walked away.

I could see Forugh through the glass window, standing in the middle of the living room with a group of people, chatting and laughing. I did not like to be around her when she was too drunk. I poured the water in the pond, glanced at her one last time, and left.

*

It was another party—held in a huge garden with a pool in the middle—that stopped me from attending parties anymore, save for a few exceptions when I knew the host and had no excuse to get out of going. Like other parties it could be summed up in a few words: drinks, nibbles, flirting, and heated discussions about art and politics.

I could not wait for this party to end. Ibrahim was away travelling abroad and since Forugh would be drinking, I was going to drive her home. The only other time I had driven her home she had been cheerful, talked incessantly, and joked about finding me a girlfriend, touching my arm and tapping my thigh. As she leaned towards me I had breathed in her scent of alcohol, cigarettes, and perfume. Intoxicating, it smelt like trust and intimacy and took my breath away. She had leaned her head back, mumbled something, and closed her eyes. I reached a large roundabout and for the next twenty minutes drove round and round, until she opened her eyes.

"We are still here? I fell asleep and even had a dream. It felt so long," she had said.

"It's been less than a minute," I had answered.

I glanced at her again, wearing a sleeveless white dress, talking to a couple who were listening to her attentively, before I found my way to the backyard. I took a book out of my back pocket and sat on a staircase leading up to a small back door.

"What are you reading?" I heard a voice. He was standing behind me, relatively tall, in his mid-thirties, with deep-seated black eyes. The back door behind him was wide open; through it I could see a six-seater table in the middle of a kitchen. "Amir Pishdad," he said, offering his hand. He must have been bored, for he launched into his life story. When he was in high school, he was in love with Persian and French literature. He naively thought that he'd avoid the dirty

business of politics and stay loyal to literature forever. Eventually he had joined the Loiters Party (Third Force) founded by Khalil Maleki, which was formed after a split in the communist Tudeh Party. Now he worked and lived in Paris as a physician and was an active member of the League of Iranian Socialists in Europe.

"How did you end up as a political activist?"

It was in the period before oil nationalisation and the Coup of 1953. In that anti-imperialist atmosphere it was almost impossible to stay neutral. One day he went to this Q&A session with Maleki, accompanying a friend who was a member of the Loiters Party…

I tuned out. I had asked him to be polite, not to listen to him rambling on. I wanted to be left alone to read my book and have the freedom to get back to the party at any time to make sure Forugh would not end up leaving with someone else. He finished his story, his eyes bright with the excitement of remembering the day that changed his life forever. I said it was a pleasure to meet him, and walked away. It was the first time I heard the name Khalil Maleki.

Forugh was standing next to the pool talking to a man in a black suit, sipping her drink. I sat at an empty table reviewing my latest poem in my head, thinking about possible word choices for one of the verses that I had found particularly troubling. I had a sudden revelation and started writing it down on a piece of tissue when two men approached Forugh from behind, grabbed her arms, lifted her in the air and threw her in the pool. A sudden silence took over, broken only by random sounds of chuckling or disapproving words. The man in black got on his knees, offered her a hand and dragged her out—shivering despite the warm summer night. The host of the party, who had run inside as soon as Forugh was pushed into the pool, came back with a white towel in her hand.

"I'm really sorry. Let's go inside and change," she said, as she spread the towel over her shoulders. "Luckily, we're almost the same size," she continued with a nervous smile.

I threw the crumpled tissue in the pool and left the party. She was sober enough to drive.

*

The before-sunset sky was dotted with grey clouds. The sea breeze had turned too cold for a summer evening. My father was shivering.

"Do you want to go back home?" I reached into my backpack, fished out a beanie and a neck scarf, and passed them to him.

"Let's stay a bit longer. Let's take a walk to warm up," he said, as he put them on.

A girl in a blue bikini got out of the water, walked into the beach, and wrapped herself in her towel. "Do you think if Ibrahim was around they would have still pushed her into the pool?"

"Perhaps not."

"They would not dare to pull a prank like that on a 'proper' girl? Would they?"

He nodded. We walked away from the beach.

Chapter Seven

To my father's disappointment, I enrolled in the University of Tehran in 1962 to study Persian Literature. He did not say anything, but I saw it in his eyes. During the first semester, my relationship with other students never went beyond reluctant small talk, until I met Amir-Hossein. That day I was sitting at a table in the department's cafe when I heard, "Typical reactionary! Which is expected of a fan of Khalil Maleki!" I looked over my shoulder and saw a student with a thick moustache pushing back his chair and walking out of the cafe accompanied by two comrades. I had seen this trio before a few times and knew them by face though not by name.

"What are you reading?" the young man at the table behind me asked.

"Was he talking to you?" I asked.

"Forget it! What are you reading?"

I had started reading *The republic* again for the first time since my return from military service. I showed him the cover of the book. He was studying philosophy and thought of *The republic* as one of the most influential philosophy books ever written. That day he was reading an English copy of *The little prince*.

"Where did you learn your English?" I asked.

"I spent two years in a boarding school in England."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah."

"Who's Khalil Maleki?" I asked.

“The founder of the Loiters Party after the split,” he said. Maleki had never been forgiven for the split in the communist Tudeh Party. “The trio” had been kids when it had happened, but apparently the hatred had passed through the generations.

“Why did he want to split the party?”

“Why don’t you join me?” he said and offered me the seat opposite his. He told me that his father was also a member of the Tudeh Party. When Maleki had led the split in the party, those who stayed loyal to the party did not even want to hear his name. However, his father, who did not approve of the split either, had still kept up his friendship with Maleki and he continued to attend Thursday gatherings at their house as usual.

“Let me tell you a story,” he said with a spark of intelligence in his eyes that from that day onward I saw whenever he talked about something that he was passionate about.

At the time, he was just a kid and did not understand what had really happened. It was not until recently that he had asked his father about that Thursday night again. Maleki was talking about de-Stalinisation—years before Khrushchev denounced the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. At some point one of the supporters of the Tudeh Party insulted Maleki, to which one of Maleki’s friends answered by saying that the Tudeh Party was nothing but the Soviet Union’s little bitch. At this point things got out of hand. Everybody was standing up, shouting, and scolding. In the midst of this, as a completion to the chaos, their two border collies started barking at the top of their lungs. Maleki was the only one who was still sitting in his chair, his head down, his ears and bald head blushing red. A couple of times he asked people to pull themselves together, but with all the raging men and barking dogs no one heard him. Except for him, who was kneeling near Maleki’s chair, trying to calm down their dogs by petting them. His mother, who always tried to be the best host possible, said, “Out! Everybody out!” She didn’t really shout, but maybe because it was a woman’s voice among angry men’s, it was heard.

"Are you really a Marxist?"

"I think light comes from the left," he said with a smile. "But I'm not supporting any ideology *per se*."

"I see."

"I think you should read this," he said waving *The little prince* in the air. "I'll bring you the Farsi version. By the way, I'm Amir-Hossein."

I shook his hand and another friendship of mine started with that handshake.

*

Amir-Hossein had studied in England and travelled all over Europe with his parents before he was even eighteen. His father was a mechanical engineer and a former member of the Tudeh Party before it was banned. His mother had studied theatre in France and worked as an actor and a playwright. Because of his parents' love for philosophy, literature, and art, his family was regularly host to the most famous writers and intellectuals of the time. Amir-Hossein had lived a life alien to me, a life I found alluring without being willing to admit it, and perhaps that was why I was drawn to him.

"Among the artists who frequented our house was this luscious actress in her late twenties. Man, you should have seen her! And it wasn't just her looks, but her hedonistic take on life that made her all the more irresistible for me—"

"What does hedonistic mean?" I asked.

"Pleasure-seeking."

"Why don't you simply say pleasure-seeking then?"

"Just shut up and let me finish my story."

"Maybe I'm not interested in your *stupid* story," I said. But I was interested. And I knew it.

When he met her he was reading *Gone with the wind*, and throughout the book he was imagining her as Scarlett O'Hara. He had just had his seventeenth birthday when his family

was invited to a party in a house with a large garden, north of Tehran. She was there too. Throughout the night, Amir-Hossein tried to be in her vicinity, looking for an opportunity to start a conversation. Late into the party, when everybody was drunk and she was surrounded by men, he was finally ready to admit that he did not have the courage to approach her, and walked away.

In a dark corner, towards the back of the garden, he found a group of teens drinking good old-fashioned *araq*. He joined in and drank *araq* for the first time. Five or six shots into drinking, he went back to the heart of the party and found her flirting with a man in a white coat who was handsome enough to intimidate any man or woman. However, the drunken Amir-Hossein was impervious. He approached her, put his back to the man in white as if he did not exist, and told her that she should see something. Under any other circumstances he would have tried to come up with the most plausible excuse. But this time he acted as if he did not owe her any explanation. She followed him with a mischievous smile that said *I know that you just want some alone time with me*. A few steps into the garden she finally said, "What is this *thing* that I cannot miss," with a sarcastic undertone. He turned and tried to kiss her.

"You tried to kiss her?"

"Yeah."

"Did she let you?"

"Nah."

"So, she was not all hedonistic after all."

"Yes, she was!" She just took a greater pleasure in keeping him thirsty, in seeing how desperate he was for her. After that night, every time she got a chance she would whisper in his ear, "Have you kissed anyone recently?", chuckling, letting him smell her perfume and feel her breath on his cheek.

"Are you done with your story?"

“Don’t look at me like you have heard the most vulgar story in your life. All men know deep inside that whatever they do, all they really want is to be loved and desired by women.”

“You’re really good at reducing the meaning of life to nothing but your base desires.”

“Life has no inherent meaning. The only way to give meaning to your life is by living it fully.”

“And how are you planning to do that?”

He answered my question despite my condescending tone. He was going to live his life by experiencing whatever it had to offer and by not expecting too much out of it.

*

Amir-Hossein was not my only close friend during my school time. I met Hasan again in the department’s prayer room. I had not heard of him since his family had moved away from our neighbourhood a couple of years back. He was not the teenager I remembered; he had a fuller body, was slightly taller, and looked more mature with his shaggy beard. Only his eyes, that always shimmered with a kind of shyness and reserve, had stayed the same. We finished our afternoon prayers. He turned his head, offered his hands, wished me a blessing, and smiled. A moment of eye contact before we said each other’s names. There was an immediate connection, which went beyond our old affiliation.

Hasan, who was a few years older than me, had spent two years to pass the entrance exam and get into the medical school after his military service, but a year into his study his passion for medicine had faded. Now he was in his second year of mechanical engineering. I never asked him what he was doing in the Department of Language and Persian Literature that day.

*

The first time, Hasan, Amir-Hossein, and I met at a cafe near the University of Tehran’s main entrance, I realised I could not have them under the same roof. A simple comment on the

unexpectedly hot spring led to the possibility of a tough year for farmers, the feudal system, land reforms, and eventually the White Revolution.

Amir-Hossein did not support the land reforms fully in their present form; however, he believed that if it was done properly, it could create relatively independent individuals, since without financial independence there was no political, intellectual, or even spiritual independence.

"You're just repeating the words of that old communist Khalil Maleki," Hasan said.

"He is a socialist. Don't you know the difference?"

"This is a *Muslim* country!" Hasan said. He disliked the Shah, who was nothing more than a puppet of the West, but what he despised even more was a Marxist.

"You still have said nothing about Maleki's ideas," Amir-Hossein said.

Hasan dismissed him with a wave of a hand. He was not going to waste his time discussing ideas of someone who was an agent of the Soviet Union.

"I don't think any Iranian is despised by the Soviet Union more than Maleki is," Amir-Hossein said with a condescending smile. The enfranchisement of women that Hasan disliked so much was also a necessary change. We could not afford to push half of the country's human resources to the margins of society. He was not arguing just from a humanistic viewpoint, but from a pragmatic and realistic one.

"Are you repeating Maleki's words again? Keep doing that and see where that gets you," Hasan said. "And I noticed that you check out every woman who enters this cafe; I'm sure you'd love to *empower* them! And you know what's important here. Getting the British imperialists to cheer for you."

"Now he's suddenly a British agent!"

"Who wants another tea?" I tried to interrupt the argument.

"I know one thing for sure. If you're independent *they* would not let you work," Hasan said.

"Who are *they*? And what about you?"

"People like me are a minority."

"Minority or not, there is a Third Force in this country; those who are anti-colonial but don't wish to submit to the Soviet Union either," Amir-Hossein said.

"Do you know this Maleki of yours had a meeting with the Shah last time to reassure him that he would respect the constitution, which basically means respecting the monarchy?" Hasan said.

"The constitution is not just about the monarchy. Plus, we should try to gain revolutionary goals through peaceful means."

"Ugh…like *they* will let you! You're either stupid or naive. This nation has only one road to salvation: going back to its Islamic roots."

"I'm studying philosophy, so I'm always fascinated by ideologies. But we should always try not to fall in love with them, since love is blind."

Hasan got to his feet to leave. He did not need any advice from a petty Marxist.

I introduced Hasan to Entezari too. It was nothing like the disastrous meeting with Amir-Hossein. He became a regular visitor to the mosque, despite living far away. Discussions with Entezari gave a foundation to Hasan's vision of a just Islamic society and deepened his love for it. A love that changed Hasan's life forever, and brought about his death.

*

I was invited for dinner at Amir-Hossein's house. We walked through a garden where chickens were roaming freely. His grandmother, wearing a white scarf, was sitting on the balcony smoking shisha. Almost invisible behind a cloud of smoke, she greeted me warmly as we walked into the house. Posters of movies covered the walls of his room. *Psycho*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, *12 angry men*, *East of Eden*…

“How many books have you got here?”

“The real library is my father’s. He has this collection of rare, old handwritten books, but we have to wait for him to come home. Just touching those books will give you this incredible feeling!”

I was browsing his library when his mother knocked and entered the room. She was carrying a bowl of fruit, two cups of tea, and a plate of dried dates on a tray. Her long black hair was resting on her shoulders, as it was in the framed picture of her on Amir-Hossein’s desk. Unlike in the photo, where she was wearing a black full-skirted dress, she was wearing a long floral skirt. She was younger than I expected and much more beautiful.

“The apples are fresh from the garden. You should try some.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Jahani,” I said.

She left.

“Your mum’s so young.”

“She had me when she was nineteen. There’s something you should see.”

He took out a book from the shelf. *Around the world in eighty days*, by Jules Verne. Dozens of autographs covered its first page. Poets, philosophers, writers, literary critics, actors, artists.

There were more of those at the back of *Beyond good and evil*. He had been collecting autographs since he was thirteen. Any well-known person who had been in their house during the last eight years.

“What do you think of Al-e-Ahmad?” I asked. I had just seen Forugh’s autograph next to his.

He liked Jalal as a person. As a thinker… I was not listening. I could not believe that Forugh had been in this house. I could not believe that Amir-Hossein had had the chance to be around her. My experience of her I had assumed to be exclusively mine, and it had made me feel better when I compared my ordinary life to his. He got my attention again when he said, “…Jalal

thought Forugh's first collections to be nothing but sexual fantasies." He could remember that his mother had an argument with Jalal, telling him that he had missed the whole point. Last time Jalal was at their house, he had brought a copy of *Arash* to show his mother a good poem of Forugh's. He thought that she was finally overcoming her obsession with sex and was about to write real poetry.

"Which poem was that?"

He could not remember. He told me how, as a child, he had nicknamed Jalal the "Cool Uncle". When you were a kid or a teenager no one was as fun as Jalal to be around. He and his wife were infertile and had an infinite love for kids. A few years back Jalal had paid them a visit after his return from overseas. When he got drunk, he started revealing his sexual adventures with a woman in Europe in the hopes of getting her pregnant. After returning to Iran, he had suggested to his wife that maybe she should find a potent man and solve the problem! His mother, troubled by Jalal's obscene stories, had said that it was time he went to bed. He was sixteen! Even as a kid, he did not have a fixed bedtime.

"What about Forugh?" I asked.

"I like her poetry, but I have seen her only twice in my life, ages ago."

"I see her all the time," I boasted and regretted it immediately.

"Who? Forugh?"

"Yeah. I work part-time at Golestan Studio."

"Really? And it never occurred to you to tell me?"

"It never came up."

"You should take me there sometime."

I could imagine that Amir-Hossein would hit it off with her and talk for hours. "Ibrahim doesn't like it when people bring their friends to the studio," I said.

"We can meet outside."

"I'm not that close to her."

"How long have you been working there?"

I was rescued by Mrs. Jahani calling us for dinner.

*

When you dearly believe in an idea, nothing is worse than seeing it shattered before your eyes. That was why I had never mentioned anything about my political affiliations and Ayatollah Entezari to Amir-Hossein; with him around nothing was safe. In his eyes, I was a moderately religious person who lived a normal life with no real interest in politics. Two days after we had dinner at his place, I saw him again at the university cafe. Arranging a meeting with Forugh was the first thing he mentioned again, over tea.

"There's something I'd like to know your take on." I changed the subject.

I had his attention. Briefly, I explained to him Entezari's take on governance and Islam. His face turned serious. He contemplated my words for a while. There was one thing about this idea that attracted him. He found it quite unorthodox compared to the common understanding of Shia clergy in regards to political power, and he liked nothing more than the unorthodox. "But in this version of governance, jurisconsult would be on the top, right?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"At the same time, this Entezari of yours wants to empower the suppressed against what he calls the tyranny of the Shah?"

"Yeah."

"To include people in governance you need some sort of a democratic system. Would it be correct if I say that what Entezari has envisioned is something like an Islamic Republic?"

"Kind of, maybe," I said after evaluating what he had said for a second. Entezari had never used that terminology himself. I got on my feet to order another tea. I had talked to distract

him, and now I felt he was reaching a conclusion which was going to question everything I believed in.

"Just sit for a second, my friend," he said. The problem was that rule of the jurisconsult sounded like an elitist doctrine, whereas democracy was nothing like that and took its power from common people. How could we bring two contradictory concepts under the same roof?

I had no convincing answer for that. "Don't you think you're against this idea because you're against religion in general?" was the best I could come up with.

"You know I'm not against religion. Against simple and absolute answers to complicated questions yes, but not against religion per se."

The fact that I had nothing to say made me frustrated, but at least I had distracted him from the idea of meeting Forugh, which he never brought up again. Perhaps he had guessed why I had asked him that question in the first place.

*

My father stopped talking. "Let's call your mother and see how she is doing," he said.

We sat at a table inside a cafe, I ordered two pots of tea, and I called my mother. My father was on the phone and I wondered if my mother knew anything about my father's past, and about Forugh. I was almost certain that she did not. I remembered one day, when we were sitting around the kitchen table; my father was reading a newspaper, I was having a late lunch, and my mother was at her tablet, the one I had bought her when she retired after thirty years of teaching mathematics. I had installed different kinds of apps on it to help us keep in touch when I left the country. One of her friends had sent her a file of Forugh reciting her poem "Earthly Verses".

Then

the sun turned cold

and blessing left the lands.

And greens withered in meadows

and fish withered in seas

and earth did not accept

the dead unto itself anymore…

In caves of loneliness

futility was born,

blood reeked of hashish and opium.

Pregnant women

gave birth to headless babies

and cradles out of shame

took asylum in graves.

Such a dark and bitter time

bread had crushed the

amazing power of prophecy.

Prophets

wretched and hungry

left the promised lands

and in meadows' stupor

lost lambs did not hear

the sound of a shepherd anymore.

"To write poetry like this, you must be very talented," my mother had said. Nothing in her tone indicated that Forugh was to her anything but a poet.

"Yeah," I had answered absentmindedly. I did not check my father's reaction. I would have if I had known what I knew today.

My father passed me the phone. Every time I talked to my mother, not knowing when I was going to see her again, it made me feel down. This time I felt a pressure in my chest, which was more guilt than sadness. I said goodbye and hung up the phone. I wondered if she was happy, truly happy. If she had ever been.

"Do you remember that mum had an audio file of Forugh reciting "Earthly Verses"? She always murmured '*and nobody knew that the name of that sad dove which had escaped the hearts, is faith*' when she did her chores.*"*

"Yes. She still does sometimes."

"A dark poem."

"Yes. It is. '*Swamps of alcohol with their acrid toxic vapours dragged into their depths the stagnant mass of intellectuals*.' And very true."

"Swamps," I whispered. "Payam asked me to go to that protest after the presidential election and I didn't. Then he went missing and my life was never the same again."

"I'm sorry."

"You did something at the time that I never forgave you for," I said. He looked at me with traces of disbelief in his eyes. I had never talked to him so bluntly. "It was a week after Payam's disappearance and long before we had started losing hope. Until then he was one of those who got arrested in a protest and after a few weeks called their family to say that they were kept in custody somewhere. I was talking to his mother, trying to comfort her, when you passed by the phone and I heard you mumble about naive kids getting themselves and people around them into trouble."

"I thought that their phone was tapped and was concerned that they might take you away for questioning."

"You didn't have to worry. Compared to Payam I was an obedient son," I said. He raised his head, threw a glance at me, before he averted his gaze. "At that time Forugh's poetry was my solace. I read *Another birth* over and over until I could recite most of the poems by heart," I added.

*

Another birth was an instant hit. She had read some of the poems to me herself and a few others were already published in literary magazines, especially in *Arash*, whose editor was such a fan of her poetry that he was willing to delay printing of a new issue if he could have a poem of Forugh's. But now that I read them over and over, and contemplated every word, I could see the maturity in her style, subjects, and word choice in comparison to her earlier poems. This made the title *Another birth* even more relevant. Ibrahim was there. I could trace him amongst the words and verses.

My lover
with that shameless naked body
stood on his strong legs
like death.
Restless curvy lines
are tracing his rebellious limbs
within his solid silhouette…
He is wildly free
like a healthy instinct
in the depth of an uninhibited island…
My lover
is a simple man,

a simple man whom

—in the ominous land of wonders—

I have hidden in the shrub of my breasts

like the last relic of a wondrous religion.

When you find something beautiful, it is not easy to resent it. I still did.

*

Ibrahim held a party a few weeks after *Another birth* was published. No one said it aloud, but everybody knew that it was to celebrate Forugh's latest book. Forugh did not show up to the party. It was held in Ibrahim's house, and understandably, it made her uncomfortable. It was one thing to be around his family and another to be around them in their own house, under the judgmental gaze of spectators. Ibrahim asked me whether I could pick her up and bring her to the party.

Forugh did not seem keen on the idea, and hesitated as if weighing her options before she said, "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"You don't have to go if you don't feel like it," I said.

"It's alright," she almost whispered, "if it means so much to him."

On the way to Ibrahim's, I took a wrong turn. I did not want to take her to the man her book was dedicated to—to the man her love for whom was woven into the poems of the collection. I was not changing anything, and the day after he would see her again at the studio. Nonetheless, I could not refrain from that desperate and sad meddling.

"You must be really happy with your book," I said.

"I was at the beginning," she said. "But not anymore." It had always been like that. When she wrote new poems, she was excited. But it was always sooner rather than later that she found them trivial. She published them because she did not know what else she could do with them.

"They have received good reviews."

"I've collected them over a period of four years," she said. She considered that lazy. She was almost thirty, but she thought that her poetry was immature for her age. Maybe because she had never had a proper education, just bits and pieces here and there.

"And you've dedicated them to Ibrahim."

"It's safe to assume that I.G. stands for his name," she said, with a smile.

"He must be really important in your life."

"Of course."

I took another wrong turn. "I don't know what's wrong with me tonight."

"It's alright. I'm not that crazy about this party anyway. I don't know why Shahi insists on having me there anyway, when we'll see each other tomorrow."

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked.

"You're a good guy," she said, after a pause.

No, I'm not. I resent him for loving you and you for letting him, I thought. "Thanks," I whispered.

*

Since Forugh had bought her blue Audi, she did not ask me to drive her around in the studio car anymore, and if she did I knew that she either wanted to talk to someone or did not want to be alone. One day, while driving her to another studio, I could tell from her dark mood that she was on the verge of a depression. During those periods, she stayed at home and did not do anything or see anyone, even Ibrahim. Because of her long history of attempting suicide, whenever her demeanour suggested another fit of black gloom, Ibrahim and her friends checked on her through her maid, Zahra, to make sure that she would emerge from that mental abyss again—energetic, full of life and creativity as she usually did—without any self-harm.

She had not uttered a word since we had left the studio. I remembered that one time when Ibrahim was on an interstate trip and she did not show up at work for a few days in a row. One evening, two of our colleagues, Mehdi and Siroos, decided to check on her and asked me to tag along.

We knocked and knocked. At least Zahra should have opened the door. Everybody was getting agitated. “Where the hell is she?” Siroos said before banging on the glassed part of the door so hard that it shattered. We were distracted by taking the small fragments of glass out of his hand and did not notice that Forugh had opened the door. I smelt stale sweat and turned to see her standing behind us. She was wearing a knee-length white house dress, her hair was tangled into a bush, and her eyes were empty. A pen and a notebook in her hand, she stood there for a second, took a glance at Siroos’s bleeding hand, and said in a dull voice, “I have bandages, come.” Mehdi followed her in and returned with a gauze and a bottle of antiseptic. “He needs stitches, I think. I’ll take him to a clinic,” Mehdi said. “You go in, we’ll come back later.” After they drove away, I took a glance inside the dark apartment, closed the door…

“Oh! An ice cream shop,” Forugh’s voice snapped me out of my daydream.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“Yes, please.”

I turned inside a side street and parked the car.

“I have not been in one of these shops for ages,” she said after we sat at our table.

“Me neither.”

“My mother lived in a constant fear of germs,” she said. They even took their own spoons and plates with them when eating out. Once they came to an ice cream shop similar to this one. Her mother took spoons and plates out of a basket and passed them around the table. From her father’s face Forugh could tell that he was losing it, and she was hoping with all her heart that he would contain his anger. As soon as her mother placed a plate in front of him, he snatched

at the tablecloth and pulled it off. He stormed out without saying a word and left them with the broken plates and their embarrassment.

"My father is a raging man, but my mother is not easy to live with either. She had this weird habit of giving her kids enemas, even when they were young teens," she said, tittering, before gloom took over again. Her father was so cross with her for that. "You can't give everyone enemas," he always complained. "She would do it to you too, if she could," Forugh always murmured when she heard him say that, as everybody giggled. She was also obsessed by washing and cleaning. "Why don't you wash the fish in the pond too while you're at it," her father teased her mother whenever she got into one of her washing frenzies. You could not ask for a healthy mentality living in that confederacy of dunces, could you?

I took a spoonful of the ice cream. It had three layers: saffron, pistachio, and vanilla, with crumbled pistachio on the top. A summer breeze carried the smell of kebab from two shops away. *I'm hungry*, I thought, and I saw her rush towards a rubbish bin on the street and throw up in it.

"Are you alright?" I asked as she returned to the table. Our eyes met for a second, a fraction of a second, and I knew that she was pregnant.

"We should go," she said, and pushed the bowl of melting ice cream away.

In a few months, with her stomach still flat, I started questioning what I had concluded in that moment. However, when I read her poem "Rose", a year or so later, I realised that I had been right.

Rose

Rose

Rose

He took me to a rose garden

and he attached a rose to my restless hair in the dark,

and finally

slept with me on a petal of rose.

O, crippled doves

O, inexperienced infertile trees, O blind windows

under my heart and deep into my waist, now

a rose is growing.

A rose

red

like a flag

in the day of judgment.

Ah, I'm pregnant, pregnant, pregnant.

I think that is why I do not really enjoy having ice cream. In my mind ice cream tastes like an abortion.

*

We were the last two people who left the cafe before it closed down. The cold wind coming from the sea stung my face. My father's eyes were glinting red in the dwelling lights of the night. "We should go home now," I said. We had stayed out way beyond what I had initially planned. On the tram, he sat opposite me and stared out the window as light and dark interplayed over his face. From the way his lips moved, I could tell that he was reciting a poem.

"Do you still have any of your poems?" I asked.

"I cannot remember when I stopped writing poetry altogether. But I remember when I started losing interest."

*

I was at a wedding and my table was near Ibrahim Sahba's. He was a poet quite well-known for his mischievous, witty poems. After Forugh had published "Sin", I had read a poem by him in which he had expressed his willingness to be held accountable for Forugh's sins.

His table was the busiest. A group of people had dragged their chairs to his table and some were just lingering around with their drinks in their hands. The sound of laughter was growing louder as people got drunk. I was sitting at my table making small talk with the people around me and was thinking of leaving before dinner was served, when I recognised the word "Forugh" amongst the din. I left my table and walked towards his. He was getting a small notebook out of his pocket.

"This poem is not complete yet," he said. He was still struggling to find the proper rhymes for some of the verses. But since everybody insisted, he had decided to read it as it was.

The poem was about Sahba not being willing to bear Forugh's sins anymore because even a bridge would break under their weight, let alone his scrawny shoulders. I am not sure why I did what I did next, when with every burst of laughter, I wanted to punch him in the face.

"You should change the word "song" to "melody", and use "passionate" as an adjective in the third verse," I said, and regretted it immediately.

"As a matter of fact that's not bad, not bad at all," he said. "It seems that you have some talent for poetry, young man. Do you write anything?"

"No."

"That's a shame. I think you should."

*

A week or two later, I was having my lunch at the kitchen in the studio, sitting on a chair opposite Ibrahim, when Forugh entered and placed *Khandaniha* magazine on the table.

"Have a look at this," she said to Ibrahim, and flicked through the magazine until she reached the page she was after. By the time she had poured herself a cup of tea Ibrahim had finished reading.

"If Sahba is making fun of you it means you're doing something right," Ibrahim said.

"I know, it's just pathetic," she said, and flipped the magazine to me so I could have a look. I scanned through the poem. It was published with the changes I had suggested.

A few months later Forugh read her poem "O Jewel-Laden Land" to me. It told the story of her getting her ID card.

I triumphed,
I registered myself,
I adorned myself with a name on an ID card
and my existence was acknowledged by a number
so, long live 678, from district 5 of Tehran.
I'm not worried anymore,
motherland's compassionate embrace,
pacifier of historical heritage
lullaby of civilisation and culture
and the rattle, rattle of the rattle of law
Ah!
I'm not worried anymore…
It is a blessing to live in the land of
poetry and flowers and nightingales
especially when the actuality of your existence
is eventually acknowledged after years.

In a place where,

with my first official look through the curtain,

I see 678 poets who

—charlatans, dressed as bizarre-looking beggars—

are looking for rhyme and rhythm in garbage…

This was the beginning of the end of my search for rhymes and rhythm.

Chapter Eight

It was 11:00 am, but my father was still in bed. I had never seen him sleep in so late. I had woken in the middle of the night, lying disoriented on the sofa, listening to ghastly noises for a few seconds before realising where they came from. My father was having a bad dream. I called him, and when he did not respond, I grabbed his shoulders and shook him once or twice. He opened his eyes, not moving, not saying anything, as if he was not still in this world. In the dim street light I could see his cracked, dry lips. I grabbed the glass of water on his bedside table and passed it to him. He turned on his right shoulder, took a sip, then turned onto his left and closed his eyes. I struggled to go back to sleep. Meanwhile, I could hear the faint rustle of his bed sheet. He could not sleep either.

I was going to let him stay in bed as long as he wished. I mixed some cereal and soy milk and sat back on the sofa. I typed "Forugh" into YouTube and clicked on the video that promised a declamation of her poems. It started with "I Feel Pity for the Garden". This was Payam's favourite. He was not a fan of literature unless it was open to "political" interpretation.

Literature was doing more than conveying messages, political or otherwise, I always told him. Perhaps, he always answered. However, as someone who lived under a totalitarian regime that was the kind of literature he was interested in.

This was one of two poems of Forugh's that Payam had found *engagé* enough to write a piece about them for a short-lived students' magazine: *Future*. I still had a copy that I kept between the pages of Forugh's collection of poetry. "Years before the Revolution, Forugh had realised that *we* were the problem, and if we didn't change and didn't take the Garden to the hospital, a violent future was waiting for us. She sensed the cancer slithering beneath the skin

of our society when everybody else fooled with the healthy appearance failed to do so," it read. I went through the stanzas Payam had included in the piece.

The garden of our yard is lonely.

Father says:

"My time has passed

my time has passed

I carried my burden

and did my share."

And in his room, from dawn to dusk,

he either reads Shahnameh

or Nasekh-al-tavarikh

Father says to mother:

"God may damn all the fish and all the birds,

when I'm dead

what difference does it make if there's

a garden

or there is not a garden,

my retirement salary is enough for me."

My mother's entire life

is a prayer rug spread

at the threshold of the fear of hell

My mother checks everything

in search of a sin

And she thinks that the blasphemy of a plant

has polluted the garden…

All our neighbours

—rather than flowers—

plant machine-guns and bombshells

in their gardens...

I wondered if his family had a copy of the short article that carried the name of their son in print. *Maybe I should email a copy to his mother,* I thought. I typed *The house is black*, and searched for Forugh's documentary. Less than a minute into the film my mobile died.

"Were you watching *The house is black*?" my father asked, sitting at the edge of the bed, his face grave, as if he had returned from a bad dream.

*

I travelled with Forugh to a leprosarium named Babaqi, located twenty kilometres north of Tabriz. A trip with the head of the Leprosy Support Association last summer had convinced Forugh to pursue the idea of making a documentary about lepers. I thought I had joined the team to do the driving, but as it turned out, a group of five was going to travel with the studio car packed with the production gear, and Forugh and I were taking the train. She knew that I had not travelled much, except to Mashhad where my parents took every opportunity to visit Imam Reza Holy Shrine, and to Gorgan in the north where I still had a great-uncle. I guessed that she wanted to give me the chance to see another part of the country.

In the train, Forugh was sitting in front of me, lost in a book. I was looking out the window at the slums that were multiplying at the periphery of Tehran, growing faster than the kids living in them, when she said, "This is really beautiful, listen. '*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was*

not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth'."

"What is it?"

"Psalm 139, Old Testament. Have a look."

I leafed through a few pages and skimmed through some pieces underlined by Forugh.

"You quoted this part in an introduction to one of your books." I moved my index finger under the lines. *I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of the Lord's wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light … He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones … Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer.*

"Yes, I did," she said with a smile. "There's something about you that I can trust."

The last comment that was meant as a compliment—and I would have taken it as one, if it had been from anyone else—ruffled me. She had hurt me by her bold presence that always intimidated me into silence, by the love I could not express, and now she was talking to me condescendingly.

"Why did you get a divorce?"

I could tell from her face that she did not expect me to ask such a personal question. I had another question in mind, a more vicious one, but I wanted to drag her in, to make her open up, and then go for it when she was the most vulnerable.

"Well, I've made many mistakes in my life, but the biggest one, I guess, was getting married when I was just a kid," she said. She had got married because she could not stand living in her father's house anymore, and she could not be with Parviz outside of marriage freely. So she told him to ask her father for her hand. He was funny, cultivated, and a true gentleman. She hurt him with the divorce and some other stuff, which were among her regrets in life.

"What was wrong with your parents' house?" I asked.

“My father! That was what was wrong with that house,” she said. He loved his kids, but he never showed any affection, as if he was afraid that would undermine his authority. He wanted absolute obedience from them, as if it was an army base not a family house. She found that ridiculous, considering he was such a rebel himself. Sometimes she wondered if he had ever thought that it was his blood running through their veins. If her father wanted unconditional obedience from his children, he should have adopted. That way he would have had a better chance of getting what he was after.

“Isn’t one expected to strictly follow orders in the army? How could he be a rebel?”

“He left his family and escaped Tafresh when he was only fourteen to avoid a levirate marriage,” she said. He came to Tehran, did all the odd jobs to survive and finally joined the army. Once she asked him why he had joined the army. To make a living, because life was tough and to survive one needed to be tougher than life, was his answer. When she started writing poetry he was supportive at first, but as soon as he thought it was bringing shame to the family he asked her to stop, as if it had an on- and off-button.

“He likes poetry? That seems strange for the man you are describing.”

She looked out the window and sighed. “Tell me about the complexity of the human mind.” There were times she eavesdropped on him walking around his room, reciting poetry and crying. He was a hopeless romantic and compensated for that by putting on a tough act.

She ran a quick hand over her right eye. Did she just clear away a tear?

“I still don’t get it. Why did you get divorced? Why did you *choose* to leave your son?”

Her face distorted with rage for a second. I could never imagine someone as beautiful as she could turn that ugly. She pulled herself together and said, “You’re so naive! We always talk about people making choices. But not everyone has one. If you are restless with lust for something—it can be poetry, art, science, anything—then do you really have a choice? If you feel miserable not devoting your life to that one thing which you think you’re born to do, then

the choice is already made for you. It's just a matter of time before you give in. I'm not saying we don't have free choice in life. I'm just saying we don't have it for everything. There is something inherently mediocre about having a choice."

We did not talk much afterwards. She got back to reading and I closed my eyes, to silence the throbbing pain behind my left eye.

*

Forugh named the documentary *The house is black.* We stayed at the leprosarium for twelve days. She spent the first three days building a relationship with the lepers as she ate with them, talked to them, and listened to their stories, concerns, and complaints. At the time, leprosy was regarded as more contagious than it really was. I could not understand how she was willing to sit at their *sofreh* and eat with them. *She has attempted suicide so many times in her life that death has lost its menace for her, and has no power over her anymore,* I thought. But leprosy was promising more than death. Disfigurement. Stigmatisation. Isolation.

I could not quell the fear of getting sick, of being consumed by death ever so slowly, and became obsessed with my hygiene. I washed my hands repeatedly, had a shower twice a day, and often came up with some excuse to avoid eating with the team. One afternoon they had tea around a small table in one of the rooms allocated to us by the head of the leprosarium during our stay. I was passing by the door when they put me on the spot by asking me to join in. I could not come up with any excuse to refuse. I poured a cup of tea from the samovar at the corner of the room and sat on a chair. At some point Forugh picked up my cup by mistake and as she took it to her lips, I almost shouted in a fright, "That's mine!" Everybody fell silent and looked at me. "I've already taken a sip," I lied.

"It's alright! I don't mind," Forugh said, put my cup back and picked up hers.

I knew I had to drink the tea. "I'm going to have a cigarette with my tea, anybody want to join me?"

I left, threw the tea away, smoked a cigarette, and retuned with a bit of tea left in the cup.

My fears found their way into my dreams. In one dream, I was standing behind Forugh, who was squatting next to a boy, talking to him, and playing with tiny stones. I wanted to tell her that I was damn tired of chasing her around. That I wanted to have nothing to do with her anymore. That she was not worth it. "You're not worth it," I said. But what was coming out of my mouth was cryptic, incomprehensible. And I had this sudden realisation that my tongue, nothing more than a stub now, had been consumed by leprosy. Forugh turned, a scar of leprosy on her face, and said, "As long as it has not spread to your soul, it's okay." I woke soaked in sweat. Of course I never showed her my concern; I concealed my fear of leprosy just as I had hidden my desires for her.

When the crew worked, I hung around in case they needed anything. Once Forugh asked me to drive to Tabriz, to do shopping for a wedding between two lepers planned for that evening at the asylum. When I returned she was dancing, lepers clapping, taking turns to join her in the middle of the circle. I passed her the boxes of cake, pastry, and fruit and returned to my favourite spot, the corner of a far-off staircase that was rarely used. I saw her waving at me, pointing at the piece of cake in her hand, asking me to join in. I shook my head, lighted a cigarette, and sat on the stairs.

When we finally left, I was relieved. On the train there were three of us now. A kid was sitting next to Forugh, leaning his face against the window. Forugh had adopted Hosein, asking his parents in the asylum to let her take him to Tehran, promising she would take care of him like he was her own. He would not be at risk of getting sick, would have a proper education and a bright future. No parents living in a leprosarium could afford resisting such beautiful promises, no matter how painful the separation.

The first time I had seen Hosein, I was in my favourite corner smoking when Forugh stopped filming and approached him and two other kids who were playing with colourful marbles. I

could not hear the conversation, but she talked to him for a while and then a few more times in coming days. One day before leaving for Tehran, I heard from one of the crew members that Forugh had decided to adopt a kid from the leprosarium.

"The one she has been talking to the last few days?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"How is she going to fit him into her busy life?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't it a bit rash to adopt a kid like this?"

"I think so. But I won't interfere," he said.

She knows she can't leave this one, right? I thought, then I threw the cigarette butt on the ground, squashed it under my foot, and said, "It's none of our business, I guess."

Forugh slid her body towards Hosein and dragged his stiff body into her embrace.

"You and my son are so alike. When you see his picture you'll know what I mean. What's your favourite food? My cooking is not good, but my mum is a superb cook. I'll ask her to cook it for you."

Hosein nodded his head without saying what his favourite food was.

*

I invited Hasan to the opening night of *The house is black*. He wanted to know who else would be there. I knew why he was asking that question. "Amir-Hossein," I said.

"You know I don't like to be around Mr. Know-It-All!"

"It's just to watch a movie."

"I'll come just because you want me there. As long as he doesn't try to lecture me."

"He won't. I promise."

The movie theatre was full. The Shah's wife, Farah, and his sister, Ashraf, were amongst the guests. They were sitting at the first row along with the film crew, the second row behind them was kept empty, and I was sitting at the third row with Hasan and Amir-Hossein.

"If I knew these bastards would be here I wouldn't have come," Hasan said.

"But you did, so shut up and let us watch," Amir-Hossein said.

"Can you two behave like adults?" I said. They sat quietly during the movie.

"Look at those two phonies clapping so hard," Hasan said, pointing at Farah, who was now wiping her tears. "I wish I could throw something at them."

Amir-Hossein took a candy out of his pocket and put it in Hassan's hand, "Go ahead. It's not going to hurt them and it can carry your sweet message across."

"Are you two crazy?" I grabbed the candy out of Hasan's hand.

The royal family and their companions stood up to leave the theatre. People around them rose to their feet, even those in the third row. Forugh stayed seated. They stopped to speak to her, but she still did not move. From where I was standing I could see the uncomfortable look on people's faces. Farah conversed with Forugh for a few seconds and shook Ibrahim's hand before departing. As they passed us, Amir-Hossein looked at Farah and gave her a lively smile, which she returned gracefully, but he stayed seated. Hasan put his hand on my right knee, which helped me to overcome the urge to stand up.

On the way out, Hasan was exhilarated.

"Thanks for inviting me! The real show was when the movie was finished. Man, that just made my day! Honestly, she's turned out to be quite alright," he said with a smile. "Do you guys want a cup of tea?"

Amir-Hossein had to leave. We went to a cafe with a traditional setting that served shisha; no women frequented it. It was loud and served nothing to drink but strong black tea, and everyone inside smelt of tobacco and hard work.

“Do you remember that one time when I confronted Davud?” Hasan asked. “I couldn’t hang out with you guys until his family left the neighbourhood.”

“Why didn’t you say hi to Forugh today? You were playmates as kids,” I said. I would never ask Amir-Hossein such a question. It showed how incapable of romance and desire I assumed Hasan to be.

“That was ages ago. She may not even remember me.”

“I’m sure she would.”

“When I was little her brother, Freidun, was my closest friend and we played in their yard all the time,” Hasan said. Forugh always followed them around and they ignored her. One time, Hasan and Freidun were standing at the edge of the balcony peeing into the garden. Forugh appeared behind them. Hasan pulled his pants up in a fright. Freidun mocked her, saying she could not pee standing up. Of course she could! She stepped forward, took off the lacy pantyhose she was wearing under her dress, and tried to pee in the garden. It hit almost everywhere but the soil. She did not stop and instead tried to bend further backward.

Hasan laughed and signalled to one of the busboys, asking for two more teas. “I jumped out of my skin as Mrs. Farrokhzad rushed to the balcony shouting and cursing. You know how obsessed she was with cleanliness. I guess urine was the ultimate untouchable for her.” He dashed for the yard door. Before closing it behind him, the last thing he saw was Mrs. Farrokhzad clutching Forugh’s right arm, smacking her head. In a couple of minutes, having heard the sound of water mixed with occasional scolding, he peeked out from the balcony. Forugh was standing at the same spot, naked, covering her crotch with both hands, her mother keeping the hose right on top of her head. Forugh raised her head, their glances met, and Hasan ran for his room. He came back in a while, leaned his shoulder against the wall and listened. Nothing. He peeked over the wall. No one was around. Her green dress and white pantyhose were hung out to dry. Her red sandals leaning against the wall, under the sun.

Hasan stared at the cup of tea in front of him. His cheeks were flushed, by childhood's memories or hot tea? I could not tell. “I can’t approve of her lifestyle, of course, when it’s against everything I believe in,” Hasan said in a low tone. He had read that piece, the one that had “Sin” attached to it; he had heard about the scandals, and was disappointed. However, tonight she reminded him of that little girl who was stubbornly trying to pee standing up—who responded to her mother, who asked her why she would do such a thing while smacking her head, that she did it because she wanted to!

I took a sip from my tea. How did the story make me feel? Mediocre? Inferior? Creativity was not the only thing I could not match her in; I could never be as bold, as daring. It showed how different we were, how incompatible. How much of a fool I was, obsessing after a woman I could never have.

“Have you read her latest collection?” he asked. “Are there any of her poems that you particularly like?”

“I don’t feel well. I need to go home,” I said.

*

Forugh had referred to poets like me as “charlatans”, as “bizarre-looking beggars” in her poem “O Jewel-Laden Land”. However, it did not end up to being the only poem into whose world of words I found my way.

Forugh and Ibrahim had returned from a short business trip in the green north. Her skin was radiant and her eyes shone with something that could only be true happiness. Everyone was already aware of Forugh and Ibrahim’s affair. But I thought if the word was officially out, then Ibrahim’s wife would have to react, to do or say something, and that could sabotage the affair. The day after, I wrote a piece titled “The hypocrisy of pseudo-intellectuals of our time”, signed it with a pen name, and sent it to *Ferdowsi* magazine. I did not get my hopes up; however, it was published in two weeks.

Now that my words were printed, they seemed to become more convincing, more vicious. In the article, I had referred to Forugh's wishes for women's progress, those mentioned in the piece that contained "Sin" published in *The Intellectual* a few years back. I talked about how her mother was a victim to a concupiscent husband who maintained another wife or lover next to his first wife for almost all his life; how Forugh and her siblings were affected by nerve-racking fights and never-ending quarrels caused by their father's insatiable lust for women. I also mentioned the story of Forugh's father pointing his gun at Forugh's mother after she had ambushed his second wife and beat her up (a story that everybody in our neighbourhood had heard of and that had turned into a dark joke that made people smile nervously).

Now, Forugh herself had an affair with a married man. As a so-called intellectual and as someone who had a firsthand experience of the demeaning effects of such a relationship on a family, she should have refrained from and condemned such relationships more than anyone else. If starting such a relationship could be justified by our flawed nature, by asking who had never given into temptation of one sort or another, what excuse one could have for continuing it for years? An impulsive act of dishonesty could be pardoned, but not a systematic one. At the end of the day, what could it be called but hypocrisy?

Two days after its publication I saw Forugh at the studio. Her gloomy mood was accentuated by her wrinkled clothes, plain face, and dark patches under her eyes.

"You look a bit…" I could not find the right word. "Is it because of the article in *Ferdowsi*?"

"You have read it too? What do you think?"

I said nothing. I had nothing to say.

"I'm not upset for myself. I'm used to this," she said. She felt bad for Shahi and his wife, Fakhri. Shahi had told her he had never seen his wife so down, so miserable. In return, Forugh had never seen Shahi so depressed, so hopeless. She kept quiet for a while, but I could see the

rage that was brewing inside her, as it wrinkled her face, narrowed her eyes, and tightened her breath before exploding into words.

"I can't believe those bastards out there! Do they think they know me? Or Shahi? Those pathetic fools think it's only about two people having sex? Those newspaper worms with their sad little lives are not even man enough to use their real names!"

She left the studio and did not return to work for the rest of the week. When she came back she was well-dressed and looked calm and rested. It was during the lunch break when she asked me if I had a minute.

"I've made a new poem. Do you want to hear it?"

That was how she talked about writing poetry: "I have made a poem." The poem she read to me that day, "Only Sound Remains", is my favourite among her works, even though nothing can make me feel more embarrassed than reading or listening to it.

Why should I stop, why?
The birds have gone in search of the blue direction
the horizon is vertical,
the horizon is vertical and movement: fountain-like…
And day is a vastness
which does not fit into the limited imagination of
newspaper worms.
Why should I stop?
The path passes through the capillaries of life
The cultivating environment of the womb of the moon
will kill the corrupt cells
and in the chemical atmosphere after sunrise

it is only sound,

sound that will be absorbed by the particles of time.

Why should I stop?…

The un-manly one,

has hidden his lack of manliness in darkness,

and the cockroach…ah

when the cockroach talks.

Why should I stop?

Collaboration of lead letters is in vain,

Collaboration of lead letters will not save the lowly thought…

I'm a descendant of the trees

breathing the stale air depresses me

a bird which had died advised me to commit flight to memory.

The ultimate object of all forces is to be united,

to be united with the origin of the bright sun,

and to be poured into the light's intelligence.

It is natural that windmills rot.

Why should I stop?

I hold the unripe bunches of wheat under my breasts

and breastfeed them…

Had she noticed that my ears were burning red? That I could not raise my head, trying to avoid her eyes? I felt beaten like a boxer trapped in a corner. Was she suspicious of me? There was no way!

What have I got to do

with the lengthy howling of wildness

in animals' sexual organs?

What have I got to do

with the pathetic movement of a worm

in a fleshy vacuum?

The bleeding ancestry of flowers has committed me to life.

Do you know the bleeding ancestry of the flowers?

"It's beautiful," I said with the little breath left in me, and I meant it. Nothing can justify what I did. However, there are times when I console myself by thinking that if it was not for the "un-manly one" and his "lowly thought" to provoke her, maybe one of her most beautiful poems would never have been written.

*

My father fell silent. The wrinkles on his forehead had deepened. His thin lips pressed together tightly and his face was distorted with reciting unpleasant memories, betrayed the bitter truth: years of justifying and suppressing had been a failure. He knew that he had no choice but to own up to his act of duplicity. He threw a glance at me, wringing his anxious hands. I had never seen the look in his eyes before. *I don't have the power to forgive you, if that's what you are asking,* I thought.

I could not look at his forlorn face, his trembling hands any more. I got onto my feet to get out of the apartment when he said, "Please stay, my son," in a tone as if afraid that if I left I would never come back. I remembered a scene from my childhood, hesitated, and tossed my jumper back on the sofa. I was playing at the playground in a park with other kids. My father was sitting quietly right in the middle of a bench—not leaving enough space on either side for

anyone to sit, now I realised—as other parents chattered and laughed. Unlike other parents, he never rushed me to finish, never told me it was time we left, and let me tire myself until I wanted to go home.

I did not leave the apartment but I busied myself with the dishes. I took my time, soaping and rinsing every piece scrupulously. Then I scrubbed the sink spotless, and rearranged the dishes and bowls in the cabinet. When I turned my head, he was still in the same place, same posture, and his hands as restless.

I looked for something to change the subject and the mood. “Were you still in touch with Ayatollah Entezari?” I asked. The muscles in his face loosened up, and his hands relaxed in his lap, but it took him a while before he spoke again.

Chapter Nine

Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, the apolitical head of the Madrasah Faizieh, had died. Probably at the time nobody thought that it could have such significant and unforeseen consequences for the country. With his passing, Ayatollah Khomeini, the most formidable and uncompromising critic of the Shah, felt no obligation to refrain from politics anymore. When Ayatollah Khomeini started his political activities against the Shah, many people had not even heard his name before, but I had become familiar with him and his ideas through Ayatollah Entezari.

In the early sixties, Ayatollah Khomeini attacked the Shah in his sermons on many grounds, such as widespread corruption, violation of the constitution, and the weakening of Islamic beliefs among the people. I turned into his zealous advocate. Through Entezari, Hasan and I got access to copies of his speeches, both written and recorded, and passed them to our friends at the university. I even managed to spread his words amongst some leftist students who were frustrated with the status quo, and interested in anyone who could challenge it.

The real turmoil came after the referendum on the White Revolution. Prominent religious and political figures invited people to protest the reforms and the regime on the streets. The protests reached their peak when, on the dawn of June 5, 1963, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had gained fame by then for his blunt criticism of the regime, was arrested. When the news of his arrest spread throughout different cities, my friends and I were among tens of thousands of angry people who took to the streets of Tehran and other major cities.

Hasan and I could not convince Amir-Hossein to join us.

“You’re a pathetic conformist!” Hasan said when, after an hour of argument, Amir-Hossein’s answer was still a firm no. “I bet you’re afraid of dying!”

“That’s not why I refuse to join the protests, but of course I am afraid! We are wired to love life. The mere fact that we are here proves it. We know the absurdity of life, but it doesn’t affect—”

“Shut up, for God’s sake!” Hasan concluded the discussion.

*

Chaos. Blood. Fire. Raids: police stations, banks, and government offices. No place was spared from the people’s rage. During the June uprising, which lasted for three days, tens of protestors (some claimed hundreds) were killed. I would have been killed too if I had been a few centimeters taller.

I was among the mob near the University of Tehran, on a main street that led to Enghelab Square, shouting “Either death or Khomeini!”, determined, and angry. The officers of the Imperial Guard, forming a meaty chain that cut the street off from the square, decided to give us the former. I heard a whizzing sound over my head, felt a breeze-like trace on my scalp, and smelt burning hair. A bullet had buzzed through my bush of curly hair. People were dashing past me, bullets were blasting, bodies were hitting the ground, but for a moment I stood there dazed, my ears buzzing, against which the faint sounds of shrieking, crying, and crashing were coming from somewhere far away. Hasan clutched at my jumper, dragged me along when he passed me, and it was only then that I turned and started running. Nonstop. Like a crazy person. None of my friends were around me anymore. From the noises fading in the distance, I could tell that I was getting away from the heart of the riot. I stopped, bending over, my hands on my knees, gasping for breath. I saw Forugh, standing next to her blue Audi, waving at me. I did not know whether I should trust my vision, blurred with sweat and lack of oxygen, or not. I rushed towards her car and got in.

She was talking on and off but I was not in the car. I was standing over my corpse, lying on the street, decorated with my blown-up brains, trying to control the shiver that was about to

take over my body, listening to the wails of sirens—a fire truck here, an ambulance there. She stopped the car. It appeared that at some point along the way I had given her my address.

"That's why you looked so familiar," she said.

I wanted to ask whether she remembered that as a teenager I had had three face-to-face encounters with her or not. I posted a letter for you; I saw you the night you were bashed drunk; and there was the other night in Cafe Naderi. "Thanks for the ride," I said.

"You look pale. Go and get some rest," she said, and looked at my trembling hand for a second before averting her gaze. I put my hand in my pocket. She hunched to get in the car, but then she straightened up her body and said, "Take good care, okay?"

*

I changed the usual route I took to work so as not to pass by the mosque. I was not sure why. Something had changed within me, but I still could not comprehend it, not fully at least. I had not visited the mosque for more than a week when Entezari came to check on me. He knew that I had attended the protests and my absence from the mosque had alarmed him.

"I just didn't feel that well the past couple of days. Why don't you come in?" I said. *I almost died*, I thought.

He had only a few minutes. The regime had kept Ayatollah Khomeini in custody. There were rumours that they were planning to try and execute him. "We can't let that happen," he said gravely.

"What should we do?" I said. *I almost died*, I thought.

He had arranged a meeting with some clergy and political activists in his house. They were going to discuss all the options to come up with an effective strategy. "You should join us. Hasan will be there too," he said.

"Okay," I said. *I almost died*, I thought.

He did not need to remind me how confidential the meeting was. I could not talk about it to anyone, no matter how much I trusted them. “You know that SAVAK is everywhere,” he said.

“I’ll be there,” I answered. I knew I would not go. I just wanted to get back to my bed and my book.

“Take care of yourself, my son.”

“Thank you,” I said. *I almost died*, I thought.

*

When I think of the weeks that followed my near-death experience, I see a thick grey fog surrounding everything and everyone. It eventually found its way into my dreams and made me contemplate a world-without-God, a notion that I found too daunting not to discard fully.

I could have easily died. Like anyone else. I was no exception. I was not the centre of the universe. And more importantly, nothing was worth dying for. Or at least, I was not ready to die for anything, or any idea, no matter how grand it was. Not yet. Probably not ever. That was a sad realisation.

*

I thought of telling Forugh how I felt. What was the worst that could happen? After that close-up encounter with death, nothing really mattered anymore. It seemed that I had lost the ability to take anything seriously, and everything I did felt pointless. At the same time, and strangely enough, the collection of all these trivial, futile affairs formed something called life that seemed like the only thing that mattered, the only tangible refuge.

It was a somber autumn night with a frosty cold wind when I decided to walk home after work. I entered a bar. I was not sure why. That night, for the first time in my life, I had a drink. And another one. After a few shots of *araq*, cheap and strong, I was sure of what I was going to do next. I had one last shot and left the bar. Walking towards her house, the wind did not feel that cold anymore. The alcohol was penetrating all my layers, soaking my masks, melting

them away, even those I was not aware of. After a while, I could hardly hear the nagging voice in my head any more, the one that would never leave me, that was the source of all my doubts, uncertainties, and insecurities. All my worries and concerns looked trivial and pitiful. I was wondering why I had never told her the truth. What was the point of all the suffering I had put myself through so far?

Looking at the dark windows, I assumed she was out and sat at the curb near her house. I felt strangely calm as I wrapped myself tightly inside my overcoat, pulled my beanie down my forehead, and closed my eyes. I jolted out of a slumber as her car turned into the driveway. She stepped out of the car and walked straight towards me.

"Ismael! What are you doing here?"

For a second I was sober again and everything felt more complicated than I had imagined.

"I don't know!"

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yes!"

"I didn't know you were a drinker."

"Me neither!"

She chuckled. She was tipsy too. I smiled at her. She smiled back.

"It's alright! We need to get some coffee into you, into us! Come on in!"

We were passing the yard, and I could hear my heartbeat in my head. I was still drunk, but felt cold and gloomy again. A shivering was about to overtake me when she opened the door to her living room and a wave of soothing warmth washed over me.

"You don't need to take your shoes off. Just stamp them clean on the mat," she said, looking at me struggling to get my boots off.

I forced one off. The second one had an impossible knot.

"Come on in now. The house is getting cold."

I gave up on it, went into the living room and closed the second door behind me, feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed with only one shoe on. *How can I talk to her, looking like this?*

"Beautiful house," I said.

"It's Shahi's. I'm just living here. Let's have a warm drink, take some rest, and then I'll drive you home."

"I can't go home."

"Why? Because you have only one shoe on?" she said, laughing. I looked down at my brown muddy boot next to my white, wet sock and smiled.

"My parents can't see me like this."

"It's alright. Stay here then."

She disappeared into the kitchen and came back with a cup of coffee in her hand. While grabbing the cup, I touched the back of her hand with my middle finger and for a second I was sober again. She poured some vodka for herself.

"I'll get my coffee later." She winked at me.

I took a sip of the coffee.

"That's boiling hot!"

"I know!"

"You're funny!"

I did not think so and pressed my front teeth on my burning tongue. I felt empty.

"Do you want to sleep? Tomorrow you'll feel better."

It seemed that she was referring to the sense of emptiness rather than my nausea. I nodded.

"Do you mind sleeping on the sofa? Zahra is sleeping in one of the rooms, and the other one still smells of fresh paint."

"Sofa is good."

She came back with two blankets. "Tonight's cold."

“Thank you,” I said.

“Tomorrow we can go to work together.”

She took her half-drunk glass, walked halfway to her room, hesitated, turned, and took the almost empty bottle of vodka.

“Drinking wasn’t what I expected it to be,” I said.

“Nothing ever is.”

“Do you enjoy it?

“I’m not sure. I don’t know whether you remember that summer when there was a rumour about an earthquake in Tehran?” she asked. “That night I was sleeping with my bird in my car when Shahi came and took me to his place. I slept in the yard, on a bed near Kaveh's. I felt uncomfortable being in his house surrounded by his family. He slept in his room; he believed that nothing was going to happen. Anyway, he had to sleep next to his wife. I did not sleep the whole night, my eyes fixed on the window of his room, hoping to see his shadow passing by. The whole night I listened to crickets singing until the sun was up. My whole body was aching with the pain of wanting and not being able to. What a painful thought that if it really had happened we could have died away from each other.”

She stood there, staring into the dark corner of the room, bottle in one hand, glass in the other, the liquor inside swirling softly, following the circular movement of her wrist. “Good night,” she said.

She closed her bedroom door without pushing it fully into its frame. Some light poured out of the tiny crack. In a few minutes, she had the light off and the bedside lamp on. I had a dreamless sleep and woke without any sense of time. It might have been five minutes or a few hours. I rushed to the toilet and threw up. A foul taste in my mouth, I squeezed some toothpaste onto my finger and washed my gums and tongue.

No light was seeping through the crack of the door anymore. My left foot inside the boot was throbbing with heat. I sat back on the sofa, took a knife from the coffee table's open shelf, cut the lace open, and took the boot off. With my burning foot on the cold soothing floor, I leaned my head back and closed my eyes for a minute or two.

Then I walked to her door, pushed it open and stayed at the entrance. The bathroom light, that I had forgotten to turn off, travelled through the living room to her room and highlighted her silhouette under the blanket. She was sleeping on her left side. I raised my right foot and landed it over the threshold in her room. I had crossed a line, literally and figuratively.

I started walking around her bedroom. I looked inside her closet, ran my fingers over her clothes, and inhaled the remnants of a familiar scent. A touch of the knee-length red-and-white-striped silk dress was enough for my body to forget its mortality, and for my brain to abandon the bit of concern it still reserved for my forbidden presence. I checked her dresser and picked up a lipstick, opened it up, rubbed it on the back of my hand, closed it and put it back again. Next to the empty bottle of vodka on her bedside table, resting on a small notebook, I noticed a silver necklace with a square pendant that contained a prayer to keep away the evil eye. She wore it almost all the time: a gift from her grandmother. I picked the notebook up. It was an old calendar similar to the one she had had with her in the hospital a couple of years back. I leafed through and read pieces of her poems, some new, some old and already published. There was an extended version of the poem she had read over Khanum Kuchik's bed. It was still slightly different from the one published in *Another birth*, titled "Green Delusion". I noticed another long poem that did not have a name yet.

I said to my mother, "It's all over."

I said, "It always happens before you expect it.

We have to send condolences to the newspaper's obituary page."

Hallow human

hallow human full of confidence

look how his teeth sing

while chewing,

and his eyes

how they slit

while staring.

And how he passes by the wet trees:

patient,

grave,

confused…

Reading these verses, a morbid feeling took me over. I put the notebook back. A perfect silence, except for the singing of the crickets outside and my heartbeat inside. I sat next to her bed and listened to her breathing, muted, tranquil and composed. Her breasts, firm and sober even with all the alcohol in their veins, pulsing rhythmically with every breath. Her face was resting on the edge of the bed. I bent forward and half of my lips touched hers, for a second. The smell of vodka and cigarettes. She opened her eyes, and my lips departed. She looked right at me, but it was as if she was dreaming with open eyes. She closed them again. My body started shivering uncontrollably. My brain was back in charge again and I could feel my sex going lifeless. Contracted and wrinkled, as it would be if I swam in cold water on a winter night.

I cannot remember how I got out. In the yard, I sat on my knees and threw up next to the apple tree. I waited for my stomach to unclench, looking at the wrinkled red apple half-covered in my barf. Was it because of drinking or the nonstop shivering? I could not tell. But it cleared

my head. I went back inside, collected the blankets and put them back into the room she had taken them from. Then I washed my coffee cup. The empty bottle of vodka on her bedside table gave me hope that the day after she would not remember anything. Perhaps only a half-cooked kiss from a man with no clear face from her dreams. I had got out of the house and closed the door behind me when I remembered that I had not cleaned up my vomit in the garden. Distressed, I bent and threw up again. I covered it over with soil and dried leaves. I looked at the silver pendant in my hand and put it in my pocket.

I never touched alcohol again.

*

I had stopped going to the mosque. "Entezari was asking about you the other day. Is everything alright?" Hasan asked me at a cafe near the University of Tehran, a few weeks after the June uprising.

"I just need some time to myself. I'll pay him a visit soon."

"That's called an existential crisis, my friend. Everybody experiences that at some point of their lives. You'll be alright," Amir-Hossein said.

"That's called an existential crisis!" Hasan imitated Amir-Hossein with the tip of his tongue poking out.

"I stand corrected. Sheep are the exception!"

Hasan ignored his comment took a book out of his bag and passed it to me. *West-mania*, by Jalal Al-e-Ahmad. As I skimmed through, he tried to explain the idea behind the book.

"You already gave him the book. We've got to go now," Amir-Hossein interrupted.

Maleki had returned from Vienna a couple of weeks ago, after almost one and a half years of self-imposed exile. He had initially travelled to Austria for heart surgery, but his wife had convinced him to stay longer to avoid stress. I was going with Amir-Hossein to meet him for the first time. Before, I would have not been interested in meeting him. I would not have

taken the risk of having my worldview shattered before me. Now it was already broken into pieces.

"What's with all the circles?" I asked Hasan. The book was covered with hand-drawn circles.

"I just draw them when I'm thinking," Hasan said. It helped him to unwind, too. He wondered if it was possible to draw a perfect circle using nothing but his hand. He had tried different strategies. Drawing slowly, doing it in one fast stroke, drawing with closed eyes, using his left hand. "Some of them are not too bad."

"Yeah. Like this one," I said pointing at the near-perfect green circle at the corner of the title page.

Amir-Hossein was meeting Maleki more often since he had convinced him to work on his political memoir, "If I don't push him, I don't think he would ever really get on with it," Amir-Hossein said as we waited at the door.

Maleki opened the door himself. He was tall, well-built, bald, relatively soft-spoken, with melancholic eyes. He took his time with every word, like a man who had all the time in the world and whom nothing could surprise anymore. He did not fit with the picture I had of him in my mind after listening to all the stories about him being blunt and plainspoken. Amir-Hossein's favourite story, the one he told all the time, was about Maleki meeting the Shah. At some point the Shah told Maleki that he himself was a fan of socialism. "That may be true. But socialism and monarchy do not get along well," Maleki responded. I would like to witness one of those transitory episodes, when he would turn from the gentle man sitting in front of me to one who was uncompromisingly forthright.

"Didn't your doctor advise you not to drink?" Amir-Hossein asked, referring to the cup of *araq* in Maleki's hand.

"Those European doctors have no idea what we're going through here. If they did, they would prescribe it instead of medicine."

Maleki put two glasses in front of us.

"He doesn't drink," Amir-Hossein said.

"What are you doing these days?" Maleki asked me.

"He studies Persian Literature and has a part-time job at Golestan Studio," Amir-Hossein answered for me.

"Golestan Studio? Are you planning on becoming a director or something?"

"I just help out around the place."

"He likes poetry. He's a fan of Forugh," Amir-Hossein said to my surprise.

"How was Europe?" I changed the subject.

"Quite alright," he said. He had the chance to read and write in peace. He also managed to meet many friends from the League of Iranian Socialists in Europe. When he was here, communication was not easy and he had to find a traveller to pass his letters on for him. If he sent them through the post then he had to be careful with what he was writing, since SAVAK would read them first.

"What's your take on the idea of living somewhere else? I mean permanently," I asked.

He thought for a second before quoting a poem by Forugh.

I'm afraid of the time that has lost its heart.

I'm afraid of picturing the futility of all these hands,

and imagining the alienation of all these faces.

I, like a student who is madly in love with her geometry lesson, am alone.

And I think the garden can be taken to a hospital…

And the heart of the garden has swollen under the sun,

and the mind of the garden, ever so slowly,

is getting empty of green memories…

He fell silent, had another shot of *araq*, and then continued with verses from another poem. Was it on purpose, or was it the lapse of a drunk and weary mind?

Someone is coming,

someone is coming,

someone who in his heart is with us,

in his breathing is with us,

in his voice is with us,

someone whose coming can't be taken away and handcuffed and thrown in jail,

someone…

He stopped. His eyes fixed on the empty glass in his hands. It seemed that he had lost track of his thoughts. There was a lingering silence. I looked at Amir-Hossein, hoping he was going to say something to break the silence, but he was playing with the shot of *araq* in his hand, rolling it back and forth between his fingers. I asked the question that had occupied my mind for a while, to break the uneasy silence.

"Is it a waste of time to pursue politics?" He had another shot of *araq* and I continued with a lower tone, "Do you regret spending your life as a political activist?"

Amir-Hossein raised his head and looked at me. I thought I had crossed a line, asking an inappropriate question, but his face did not show any feeling.

"Most of my life I worked to further social-democratic ideas," he said. What we had was not even close, and he thought that it would not be for any foreseen future. So he was

disappointed. Did he regret it? He had been jailed a couple of times, defamed, and even tortured. So it was fair to say, yes, at times. However, he had got involved in politics to change things for the better. “I think I’d probably go down the same path, if I had a second chance.”

“Say hi to Ibrahim for me. Tell him, he was right,” Maleki said, as I was about to leave. He knew Ibrahim from their time in the communist Tudeh Party.

“Right about what?” Amir-Hossein asked.

“After the split in the Tudeh Party, we, the reformists, decided to form a socialist party,” Maleki explained. As naive as they were, they thought the Soviet Union would understand the logic of their actions and support them. However, they were attacked and defamed mercilessly. They had decided to keep a low profile for a while. Ibrahim was among a few reformists who believed they should ignore the Soviet Union’s reactions and form the party nonetheless.

“I’ll pass on your message,” I said, but I never did. The next time I saw Ibrahim in the studio, Forugh was sitting on the sofa next to him, laughing on the verge of tears. “You’re so funny,” she said to Ibrahim, touching his arm with the back of her hand.

I left.

*

I visited Maleki one last time before his arrest. He was working on the translation of *The black book of hunger* by de Castro, sitting behind his desk in the corner of the living room, with a cup of strong black tea on the side.

“Can you get your works published now?” I asked a bit surprised.

“No,” he said and got on his feet to pour tea for us from the samovar, which was always boiling on a small table near his desk.

“Ismael, you asked me a question last time,” Maleki said, “which I don’t think I answered. I’m well aware, my son, that for a decent man even day-to-day life has turned into a challenge in this country, but I still have hope and I think—”

Someone knocked at the living room door and entered. His head was shaved and he limped as he walked. “Hushang?” Amir-Hossein asked. He had been arrested on the street after leaving the University of Tehran, and no one had heard of him for the last ten days.

“What have they done to you?” Maleki asked.

“Taught me a lesson,” he said with a forced smile.

“Take a seat,” I said.

“I can’t really sit.”

“Make yourself comfortable,” Maleki said.

Hushang got on his knees and then lay down on his stomach. I saw Maleki’s lower lip trembled and I thought, *God, I hope he doesn’t cry*. Maleki excused himself and left. Nobody said anything until he returned.

“I’ll be alright,” Hushang said to Maleki.

“You’ll be, my son, but not our nation,” he said. By these barbaric responses to peaceful activities, they were pushing people towards violent actions which would eventually write the future of the nation in blood.

Maleki offered Hushang a cup of tea, which he got on his knees to drink as he talked about his arrest and interrogation. He was tired, so he left. Without a word, Maleki took a piece of paper and started writing.

“We’d better get going too,” Amir-Hossein said.

“Just wait for a few minutes. I need you to take this to the printer’s first thing tomorrow, if you don’t mind.”

We sat in silence as Maleki continued writing.

Amir-Hossein stopped under the street lamp outside Maleki's house to read the open letter. His drawn face, dimly lit by the yellow lamp, turned more fretful as he progressed. I listened to him read the letter in a soft, controlled voice against the melody of chirping crickets. It told the story of Hushang (without mentioning his name), invited "them" to learn from history and think about the consequences of their actions, and finally accused "them" of stealing people's rights to free choice, despoiling the resources of the nation, and ruining its future. Maleki had finished his open letter saying that he was writing the letter so they could arrest him too if they wished to do so. He was not welcoming prison, but he was not afraid of it either. He was used to torture, no hair was left on his head to be shaved, and even in his own house, he felt like he was in prison.

"This is going to cause him trouble. Maybe I should delete the last bit."

"You can't do that," I said. He did not respond. "He'll find out after it's published. You know that, right?"

"He can't afford to go to prison in his condition. He is angry now, but he'll understand."

In retrospect, I think that if anything, Amir-Hossein should have taken out the bit where Maleki asked "them" to learn from history. There is nothing a tyrant or a totalitarian system hates more than studying history. Their very existence is the proof of that. They prefer to turn their backs on history and let it take its course.

*

"Maleki was arrested," was the first thing I heard after I picked up the phone, still disoriented with sleep.

"We saw him last week!" I said.

He had had a meeting with a member of the British Labour Party and was arrested afterwards. The open letter had not helped either. "I shouldn't have taken it to the printer's in

the first place. I should've waited for a day or two, let him calm down, and talked some sense into him," Amir-Hossein said.

"You just did what he asked you to do," I said. I waved at my parents, waiting in the middle of the living room, looking anxious, waiting for the bad news, the only kind of news that would come after midnight. I reassured them and asked them to go back to bed.

Maleki was tried and sentenced to three years in prison.

*

I had heard enough for one night. I took a long shower, hoping that when I was out he would already be asleep. Then I could have some alone time. Maybe go for a walk, or have a drink at a bar. What I had put out as his dinner— cheese, bread and walnuts—was still on the table, untouched. He had taken only a sip of his milk.

"We passed by an Afghan restaurant the other day, maybe we can have dinner there?" he asked. He never cared for dinner, for food in general. He could live on bread and yogurt for weeks without complaining. He was demanding to spend some time with his son.

"Maybe we can go tomorrow?"

"I'd prefer tonight, if you don't mind."

No matter how his narrative has made me feel, the righteousness is not mine, I thought, and got ready to go out. Only in retrospect did I realise that he insisted on having dinner then because he knew what he was going to tell me later would change things for the worse.

It was dusk, but the weather had not cooled yet. Everything around us, the asphalt, the walls, even the trees, was shedding the heat it had collected during the day. A few minutes, and he was already slogging through the heat. "Have some water," I said and passed him a bottle. When he was done drinking, two young girls wearing see-through crochet dresses walked past us and I saw him shaking his head in disapproval. I was in no mood for an argument, but I said nonetheless, "Women should be free to wear whatever they want to. It's sexist to think—"

“It’s what?” he asked.

“Sexist. It means having prejudice—”

“It doesn’t matter what it means. You should know better by now.”

“What do you mean? I can’t question your opinion?” I said, surprised with the hostility in my voice.

“You can question anything, my son,” he said calmly. “Just try not to use pre-made labels. *Ideologies* have always used labels to suppress reason and to silence any opposing voice.”

“I ask a question that I think is reasonable then: why are we so afraid of women’s bodies?”

“Even if we are, I don’t know why. I don’t claim to know Western culture either. But I am sure about one thing. They are not afraid of anything that can be capitalised on,” he said. “At the end of the day none of this really matters. Let’s have dinner in peace. Who knows when we will have the chance for a night out again?”

Chapter Ten

In the spring of 1966, Forugh travelled to Italy to attend the Pesaro Film Festival for a screening of *The house is black*. One day, after sorting out the mail and running a few errands, I sat in the kitchen with a letter in my hand, addressed to Ibrahim. It was the second time in my life that I had held a letter of Forugh's which was written for another man. *I should avoid trouble and return it while I can*, I thought. He was out at the time, and I could take the envelope to his office, put it on his desk, and pretend that I had not carried it around in my pocket for the whole morning.

During the lunch break I got a dozen envelopes from the nearby post office. After work, I stopped at a stationary shop and bought a fountain pen, similar to the one Forugh used to write with. At home, I took a couple of white pieces of paper and jotted a few words on each of them with the new pen. I put each inside of an envelope, wet the flap, and sealed them. Then I boiled some water in the kettle and got into testing my plan. Soon I had a rough idea of how to use steam to open an envelope without making steam marks on the envelope or ink stains on the letter. I practiced it a few more times before I tried with Forugh's letter. There it was in my hand, untouched, unmarked.

She was writing from Rome, under the sun and surrounded by sculptures. She had watched a few movies and had been disappointed in them. She had thought of shopping, but could not stand the tedious affair of trying shoes and clothes on. She had found not having a proper goal nerve-racking, and generally did not feel well. "I'm constantly facing this question that without you, without you, without you, what is left for me?"

I resisted the urge to crumple the letter in my fist. But I still did not want to hand the latter to Ibrahim myself. I followed the line-mark to fold the letter and put it in the envelope to throw

it back into the studio's mailbox early morning. Ibrahim had the key to the mailbox too, and he would find it himself at some point.

*

I worked in the studio only three days a week; however, I checked the mailbox every morning before anyone showed up. The second letter came in a week. She felt like throwing up when she thought of *The house is black*. She believed that nothing was worth getting credit for too long, especially a naive movie like this. Moreover, not having any news from Ibrahim had given her a sense of suffocation. "If I was in Tehran I would come to the studio. If you weren't there I would call your house, if you didn't pick up I would hang around your place looking at the windows for any sign that showed life was going on as usual and then I would be relieved…"

One or two letters later, she was in Pesaro for the opening night. "In the hall before the first movie, everywhere I looked there was just talking, weird clothing, strange hairdos, eating, and eating, and more eating…until I saw Bertolucci and started feeling more at ease…" She sent a few more letters during the festival before travelling to London. She mostly talked about movies she had watched at the festival and how she felt nervous about appearing in front of the audience and critics after the screening of her movie. I read those letters, some of them a few times, and threw them back in the mailbox for Ibrahim to pick up.

In all her letters, she expressed her love for Ibrahim, but it was after reading one particular letter that I did not return it to the mailbox. I had no clear plan for what I was going to do with it, but every time I pictured Ibrahim reading that letter, it drove me mad with jealousy. "Love like milk congested in the breasts and not sucked out is cutting my chest open. If I'm born again in a thousand years I'll still love you. If wind takes away my ashes, if I am turned into nothing, I'll still love you…My dear Shahi, dear Shahi, dear Shahi!"

I kept the next few letters too.

“From your letter I’ve realised that you haven’t received some of my recent letters. I don’t know why. Maybe someone else gets them and doesn’t pass them to you? I think you should blame the postman though. Last time I told you that I didn’t like him and you asked me why? This is why!” In the rest of the letter she talked about her visit to the National Gallery in London, and how, staring at the painting of Leonardo da Vinci in which everything was dissolved in a light blue, she had undergone something like a religious experience.

I had to return the letters eventually. I knew I had no choice. But I still held onto them for another day or two before I threw four or five letters all together into the mailbox. Then I went home, and in a couple of hours I called the studio to let Ibrahim know that I could not come to work for a while.

*

I returned to the studio in a week. For the first two days, I did not check the mailbox. I knew that if I found any of her letters in there, I could not resist the temptation. On the third day Ibrahim asked me whether he had any letters or not.

He had. I folded it in two, put it in my back pocket, took it back home and read it before I had changed my clothes. “I’m evolving in the way I love. I feel like nothing can threaten my love because it has achieved a depth and maturity so that it stands above all menace. It has turned to be like my blood, my breath, like the pupils of my eyes. I don’t want you for myself any more, I don’t want you to just be with me. No, I want you to be, just to be. Like the sun that as long as it exists there is light and hope…”

I did not read the rest of the letter. My mind started to wander; images flashed through my head one after another, taking me through years of this obscure one-sided love, all the torments, troubles, betrayals and deceptions, and finally the sad realisation that I would not be able to put an end to it.

For the first time I realised that she did not see me as a “man”, and not even as a naive young man as I had thought before, and she could never see me as a potential lover. Notwithstanding, I had appealed to her motherly instincts, perhaps with my nervous behaviour around women in general and her in particular. To her, I was just a shy kid. That was why she always made sure that I never missed out on office parties, raises, and bonus payments for the New Year. I was not in charge, she was, I realised. She was the only one who could end this, who could put me out of my misery, but how could she end something she did not know existed?

I would be in the studio, impatient to see her on the first day she returned. That made me feel small and angry.

When my mind returned to the room where I was sitting behind my desk with my head over my arms, the paper, wet with my tears, was crumpled in my fist. The second page of the letter was ruined. I could just throw it away; they would probably blame the postman. Instead, I found a similar paper. It was slightly brighter, but I did not care. On top of the page I wrote, “The ink of my fountain pen is finished. Now I have to write with a pen which is going to make my handwriting look awful.” Then I put the new paper on the old wrinkled one and tried to copy her handwriting, following every curve, every dot, every loop and stroke meticulously, until my fingers ached. The day after I took the letter to Ibrahim’s office.

“This was in the mailbox for you,” I said.

“I checked it just now, nothing was there.”

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t today your day off?”

“I had something to take care of.”

*

“How was your trip?” I asked Forugh on her first day back at the studio. I was having my lunch in the kitchen and she had come in for a smoke.

“You look tired,” she said.

“Couldn’t sleep last night,” I answered.

“Why?”

“It’s all good now.”

“My trip was alright. A bit too long. I think I shouldn’t have gone to Germany from London.”

“How was the festival?”

“A bit disappointing,” she said. It had turned into a constant competition, between French directors and critics led by Godard on one side, and Italians on the other side. If Godard left the cinema in the middle of a film, half of the theatre would follow him. She hated this kind of attitude towards art, these ridiculous master and devotee games. Maybe she was wrong, but she thought the human condition had left cinema and it was reduced to a mere search for new forms and techniques.

“No good movies then?”

“I didn’t mean that,” she said. She had watched a few good ones, both in the festival and in cinemas across Europe. She loved *Africa addio* by Jacopetti. It was as if the images could expand and contract and grow soft and hard in harmony with their concepts. Kilometres of corpses, decaying corpses, women, men, children—and vultures. Mass execution and massacre. “At one point, I thought I was going to throw up. Watching death makes you humble—” she tapped her cigarette over the sink to ash “—I also enjoyed watching *Pierrot the madman* by Godard. But the audience whistled and booed so much that I wanted to stand up and shout, oh shut up you sons of bitches!”

“And of course *Cul de sac* by Polanski,” I said, and realised the stupid mistake I had made. She had mentioned that movie in one of her letters to Ibrahim as the best movie she had watched

during her trip. “Ibrahim was telling the guys how much you loved it the other day,” I explained. I could only hope that she would not bring it up later.

“I think Eastern European cinema is the best at the moment, especially Polish directors. This trip reminded me of how much I want to work, of how much I’ve wasted my time these past two years.”

She took a step towards the table, crushed her cigarette butt in the ashtray, and said, “Why don’t you go home and take some rest? You look like you could use a nap. I’ll tell Ibrahim that you had to go.” Then she left. I lit a cigarette, my hand trembling. *I should go and never come back*. I knew that I would not.

*

Lust. Obsession. Deceit. *I need a break,* I thought. Without saying anything, I went to the kitchen and started cooking.

As a young teenager, I saw my father as a solemn and spiritual man who was too wise to waste his words. A man who mostly talked through his wife if he had something to say to his kids, to neighbours, to other family members. But as I grew older, as I observed him more closely, I started seeing an ordinary introverted man and thinking about his life made me sad. He seemed to have led a passionless life. No career-related ambition and no ability to make a close bond with anyone, either his wife or his children, either his family or his friends. It seemed nothing could spark true passion in his heart, not even literature and gardening. Literature had been reduced to a career and gardening to a way to kill time.

Now I knew that in his own twisted fashion, he had experienced passion at some point in his life. Now it seemed that he had consumed all his share of passion during his obsession with Forugh, and then not much was left to spare.

“I’m not sure if I want to hear your story anymore,” I said, as I put a pot of fried rice on the table.

"It's not going to take much longer, my son," he said. "I promise."

We ate our lunch in silence—*patient, grave, confused*.

Father took a nap after lunch. Then he had a long shower. Finally, he sat on the balcony, placing his chair so I could only see his back. Privacy had not been a design factor for the unit. *There is something you are reluctant to say and I'm not interested in hearing,* I thought. *Why don't we stop right here, when it's not yet too late*.

Chapter Eleven

Forugh read to me a poem named “Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season”. I had read bits and pieces of it while standing over her bed that drunken autumn night.

And this is me
a lonely woman
at the threshold of a cold season
coming to understand the soiled existence of earth
and the sad innocent despair of the sky
and the impotence of these concrete hands.

The poem was long and at times convoluted, and I could not stay focused. However, two particular stanzas attracted my attention, and got me thinking.

And my wounds are all from love,
from love, love, love…
And how the trace of five branches of your fingers
—which were like five words of truth—
have marked her cheeks.

*

Forugh had returned from lunch at her mother’s when Ibrahim asked us to bring back a reel of film from another studio.

I was driving in silence. There was a somber expression on her face. Another phase of depression? Perhaps. Something about her red eyes and the way she uttered her words—every word taking its time, sitting on her lips more than it should before departing—gave me the impression that she was on some sort of a drug. I could not be sure. I was thinking about the question that I had had in mind for the last two weeks—the question that listening to her latest poem had evoked.

"Did he slap you?" I finally asked.

She snapped out of her reverie-like mood. "What?" she asked.

"Has he ever slapped you?"

"Once."

"What for?"

"I wish I could be just a housewife or something. Cook, clean, eat, sleep with my husband once a week, give birth and raise my kids," she said. Being a housewife was the easiest way of life for a woman. Maybe she lacked something, she wondered. She had always been looking for love and complete intimacy. She wanted to give herself to love in a way that one could give oneself only to death. Maybe that was the reason for the challenging emotional life she had always had. Yet every time she had tried to be just a simple woman, no ambitions, no complications, she started despising herself.

"Are you thinking of leaving him?"

"No."

There was something about her tone when she said "no" that I did not find convincing. Or maybe I was not convinced because I did not want to be. We did not talk anymore, but her last word—compelling or not—had triggered a rage in me, which was heavy with years of suppression, longing, jealousy, and confusion, and was becoming harder to restrain with every second. I was angry with myself, with her, with fate, with life…

"I'll be back soon," she said after I parked the car.

I nodded. If I opened my mouth the rage that was swirling up inside me, banging at my clenched teeth, would pour out. When she disappeared inside the studio, I got out of the car and kicked the driver's door before I took out the tiny knife given to me by Entezari years ago (which now I had attached to my keychain), flicked it open and struck the car tire. With the first strike, the feeble blade snapped out of its pivot and hit my chest and then the ground. I threw the handle at the sidewalk. Then I took her silver pendant out of my pocket and threw it into the car. *I've had enough of this! Enough is enough!* I started striding away, not knowing where I was going. I just knew that I did not want to be there when she returned. I hesitated, turned back and picked up the knife handle. I still needed my keys.

I had changed the tires a few weeks back and they were too solid for that dull rusted blade. I never found out what the cause of the accident was. In my head, it happened like this. She was driving back towards the studio, fast—the way she loved to drive when she was down, as if trying to leave her sorrow behind. She noticed her silver pendant under her feet, the one she had been looking for for so long. Almost without thinking, like a reflex, she stretched her hand down and reached for it. The pendant, the talisman for the evil eye, was in her hand as she raised her head and saw a minibus turning in at the junction, only a hundred metres from the studio.

That night I was thinking of calling the studio to let them know that I was going to quit when the phone rang and I was told about the accident. Why wasn't I behind the wheel? She had sent me on an errand. I lied out of fear. The image of Forugh reaching for the pendant formed in my mind at that moment and has haunted me since. The day of Forugh's burial, I searched the location of the accident, less than a hundred metres from the studio, for the silver pendant. It was not there.

Later, I also searched inside the Jeep, inch by inch. That was the reason I had returned to work for another day, and then for another week after Ibrahim asked me to get rid of the Jeep, since he did not want to see it again. It was not in the car either. I sold the car for its parts and gave the money to a charity.

The day after selling the car, I returned to the studio to inform Ibrahim that I was going to quit. He was not in his office. I asked around. He was in the studio somewhere, and would be back in his room soon. I went to the washroom and saw him standing in front of a mirror, his face covered in tears. He snapped out of his trance-like mood, bent over the sink, and splashed water on his face.

I returned to work the next day. I was watering the flowers in the office when Ibrahim came up to me and said that two days ago, he had been coming back from Zahiroddolleh when he realised that he was near Kashan. He had driven almost two hundred kilometres before he knew where he was. He thought it was better if I drove him today.

During the next two weeks, I drove him to visit Forugh's grave a few more times. I always waited for him in the car and we rarely talked. Once he asked me, "Did you go to her funeral?"

"No."

"Me neither. What was the point of seeing her going under?"

On the way back, we saw two of his acquaintances. He asked me to stop and give them a ride. The couple were in their mid-fifties. The man worked in a bank, I figured. The woman, also a bank clerk I guessed, was talking about their plans to move to a bigger house in a lush neighbourhood when Ibrahim barked at her out of nowhere, "Why are you alive? Huh? Why are you alive when she is dead?"

"I'm really sorry," he said a few seconds later to the stunned couple. No one said another word during the trip.

"I'm not going to Zahiroddolleh anymore. I need to stop," he said when we reached the studio.

"I've found another job. I'd like to quit, if you don't mind," I replied.

"Alright. Come by to pick up your last check," he said and walked in.

I sat on a bench in front of the studio, the same spot that I had always sat and smoked cigarettes for the last few years. I lit one last cigarette and imagined Ibrahim running out of the studio, picking her up, carrying her in his hands to a hospital just a block away, where she was not admitted because it was strictly for blue-collar workers. Even Ibrahim pleading "But she is dying" did not change anything. Ibrahim, driving to the next hospital, turning and looking at Forugh's body in the backseat every few seconds, calling her name, trying to…

Perhaps the truth was those two young hands,
those two young hands,
which were buried under the unceasing snow.
And next year, when spring
sleeps with the sky beyond the window
and her body spouts
green fountains of light branches,
she will blossom, dear yaar, the dearest yaar.
Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season.

And then write poetry like "that". Like an oracle. Oracle of death. Rebirth. Life.

*

I did not cry when I heard the news of her death. Years of yearning for her had dried me of any tears. The curse had lifted. My suffering was at an end. At least I thought so.

My death will come on day, in a bright spring

in a winter, dull and distant

or in an autumn emptied of passion and joy.

That was what I murmured when, after a month, I finally paid her grave a visit. Late at night, when I was sure nobody was around. I stayed there in silence. Staring at the tombstone that had no writing, no date.

Perhaps at midnight my lovers,

place roses on my grave.

I had no roses with me. That was the first and last time I saw her grave in person. I saw a picture of it almost a decade later. This time it had a proper stone with a name and a date, and the poem "Gift" from *Another birth* was carved on it.

I'm speaking of ultimate night,

of ultimate darkness,

and I'm speaking of ultimate night.

If you came to my house,

oh you, the compassionate,

bring me a light,

and a window,

to look through

at the crowd of the blessed street.

*

I needed to get out of the apartment; I needed to have some fresh air. It was almost dark outside, a curious sultry night. I strode through the streets, counting my steps as I did when I felt anxious. Three thousand four hundred and twenty steps later and I was still restless. The sweat running down my body, which usually contained my frustration, was nothing this time but water and minerals. It seemed that I could not perspire my anxiety. I passed by a bar. I could use a drink, but if I started, I would not be able to stop. I kept on walking, and the more I thought the more indignant I got. I felt as if I had been cheated out of my peace, the fragile peace that after Payam's tragedy it took me a long time to acquire, and a lot of discipline to maintain. My mind was restless trying to make sense of everything, if such a thing was possible. How could I comprehend what I had heard? How could I find peace again? I did not want to think about it! I did not want to think! Period! I stopped in at a corner of a park, dark and secluded. No one was around. I shouted, then louder, and louder. I continued walking. I knew that this story would not leave me alone. Not now. Not soon. Not ever.

I opened my wallet and looked at the single stick of a cigarette that had been sitting there for almost two years now. I lit it and took a few drags greedily before I crushed it under my heel. I had promised Ellie not to smoke. She would be back soon. I had a sudden urge to see her, to hear her voice, but I did not call her. What if I cried? What if I cursed him? What if I cursed my life, my luck?

I had heard something disturbing and ominous. However, when I thought about it, I found out that the whole thing was not too far away from me and who I was, and I could see some elements of myself, of my own personality, in it. I recalled when I fell in love for the first time as a teenager. I was sixteen when I went on a five-day tour with my mother and brother. There was a girl on the bus, and the moment I saw her, I fell in love with her. I did not dare to make

a move until we were back and it was too late. Her father was waiting at the travel agency to pick them up. I could not stop thinking about her. I only knew her name was Manijeh, which I had learnt after her mother had called her name. Whenever I was on the street, I was looking for a red scarf, the colour she was wearing during the trip. Red was the colour of the day, so almost every day I experienced a short-lasting moment of hope before it was shattered. One day, while cycling, I saw something I was not looking for: an old white Mercedes, the same car as Manijeh's father, and the bald man driving it *was* her father.

I started cycling, following the white Mercedes. Thanks to the congested traffic and traffic lights, which changed in my favour, I followed the car until it stopped at a driveway. I had made it and the excruciating pain in my thighs did not matter the least. I cycled there every day, and then up and down the alley in hope of…I did not know in hope of what. Once, while passing the house, I raised my head and there she was. Behind the window with her honey-coloured eyes and a big smile. I did not smile back, kept cycling, went back home and never returned. So many years had passed, and I was still not sure why I did what I did. Why didn't I wave at her? Why didn't I smile, at least? Why?

*

"You should go to bed, it's too late," I said. He was sitting on the balcony. I had not offered him any food. He looked pale.

"Do you mind if I sit here a bit longer?"

"Okay," I said, and turned inside.

"My son," he called me. I returned to the sliding door and stayed there without saying anything. "I knew if I told you this, I'll alienate you. One day when you have your own kids, you'll know what that means for a parent. That's how I'm paying for my sins. Not that I had a day in which I didn't."

I nodded and went back in. I sat in front of the TV, changing the channels without watching, letting the meaningless noises and colours drown my mind. It only worked for a few minutes. I thought of his sickly face, turned off the TV and said, “Do you want some tea?”

He nodded approvingly. While the water was boiling, I looked for the pictures of Forugh’s grave on the net. It was almost as he had described. However, it had another name he had failed to mention: her father. *Daughter of Colonel Mohammad Farrokhzad* it read. I felt a sense of pride behind those words, carved on the chillingly white stone to re-emphasise the father-daughter relationship. Was it because almost the whole nation had mourned her death? Or because even Farah, the Shah’s wife, sent her condolences to her father? Considering her relationship with her father, whose approval she craved her entire life and never got, I found that ironic. I had another thought, which I found unfair, as it seemed more like a farfetched speculation, but I still could not hold it back from popping up in my head. Was her father, somewhere deep inside, also relieved? She died, young and at her peak like a rock star, sparing him all the shame and leaving behind all the fame and glory.

I took a cup of tea and some dates to the balcony, where he was sitting, pale and weary.

“Do you want to know what happened to Maleki?” he asked.

I was about to say that I wanted to hear nothing, not even a word! Then I thought of how the next twenty-something hours of his stay would look like in silence. What could I do? Leave the apartment and only return when he had left? *It can’t get worse than this*, I thought.

This time I was right.

Chapter Twelve

Maleki was released halfway into his prison term. His heart condition had deteriorated and SAVAK was concerned he would die in prison. They did not intend to make a "martyr" out of him.

It was two or three months after Maleki's release that Amir-Hossein asked me to pay Maleki a visit. I was in the car with Amir-Hossein when he had picked Maleki up from the prison. That night we had not said anything beyond small talk. Now I did not feel like going. I just wanted to stay in the grocery shop—where I was working again—for another two hours and then go straight home and to bed. Amir-Hossein insisted. He had been visiting Maleki in and out of prison regularly and I could not understand why he was so insistent on having my company all of a sudden. He would not take a no for an answer.

"What has he been doing since he got out?" I asked.

Al-e-Ahmad had used his connections to pull some strings and get Maleki a job in the Department of Publication and Translation at Melli University. Then he had met with an American human rights activist, infuriated the regime, and been fired by the president of the University.

"He really knows how to piss the authorities off."

"It seems so."

Maleki himself opened the door. I could tell that he did not expect to see us, as it was a bit late for visitors. Amir-Hossein passed him the packet of apples and a box of chocolate cake he had brought along.

After tea and small talk Amir-Hossein picked up the bundle of pages on Maleki's desk. He had written a big portion of his political memoir while in prison and now was working on the rest. It was almost finished. Amir-Hossein skimmed through some of the new pages.

"Do you want me to edit it for you?" Amir-Hossein asked and passed the draft to me.

"Maybe in a month or two," Maleki said, and I noticed that something in Amir-Hossein's face changed.

While they talked, I flipped to the middle of his memoir and read a paragraph about Maleki's first arrest almost thirty years ago. The officers were searching his room, going through the library. One of the agents took *Capital* out, leafed through it, looked at the picture of Marx at the back of the book for a second, and put it back in the library. Then he took a chemistry book, printed in red, and threw it on the pile of suspicious books! The story was comical, but it did not make me laugh. Instead, my brain hung on to the word red. *Forgive her, whom across her coffin, the red current of moon flows, and the turbulent fragrances of night, disturbs her body's one-thousand-year-old sleep…* And I knew my mind would go through Forugh's poetry looking for the word red, and would continue until it had scanned every single poem, every single verse, even though I desperately wanted it to stop. And for her voice to leave me alone.

"Are you alright? You look tense," Amir-Hossein said.

"I just need some fresh air."

I left for the yard and lit a cigarette. *I was not the only man who desired her,* I thought. Maleki had published one of her early poems in his magazine *Nabard-e Zedengi*, and had a signed first edition of *Another birth* in his library. What did Maleki, one of the most restrained men I have ever seen, feel about Forugh? Not about her poetry or personality, not about Forugh as a person, but as an attractive woman? He must have felt something that lurked beneath the surface and tingled his skin. Even if he was twice her age, even if he loved his wife, even if he

was too dignified to acknowledge it… The thought did not console me, but embittered me further. I already knew that my sin was not my desire, but my actions.

How would life be if we could not hide our feelings? It would be chaos. No wonder we evolved with the means to mask our emotions and desires. Did Forugh never really fit in because she was unable, or unwilling, to properly conceal herself in a society of veiled bodies, veiled voices, veiled thoughts? That was one of my first attempts to understand Forugh after her death. A process—as self-revealing and painful as it was—without which any closure seemed unattainable.

I pressed the cigarette butt on the wall and tossed it into the garden. I did not want to go back inside, and even though I never smoked back-to-back, I lit another one. *Life is perhaps lighting a cigarette, in the languorous interval of two love-makings…* Damn it! It did not matter where I was and what I did. I was not to be left alone! I stepped on the half-burned cigarette and rushed back in.

"Feeling better?" Maleki asked.

"Your nose is bleeding!" I responded. Maleki touched his nose and ran for the toilet, tilting his head back. He came back with a bloodstained cloth in his hand, pressing his nose every now and then to make sure the bleeding had stopped.

"How are you?" Amir-Hossein asked Maleki.

"I'm alright."

"Does that happen often?" I asked.

"It started more than a decade ago and happens now and then."

"With no reason?"

"I don't know. The first time it happened, I was in a meeting with Prime Minister Mossadegh," Maleki said. Mossadegh had wanted to have a referendum for the dissolution of parliament and to have another election. Maleki thought that was a mistake. Without parliament

in charge, the conservatives had a perfect opportunity to orchestrate a coup. Maleki could not convince him to change his mind. “The path you have chosen is going straight to hell, but we will follow you nonetheless,” Maleki had told him finally. “Your nose is bleeding, Khalil,” he had responded.

“That path was straight to hell alright,” Amir-Hossein said. “He should’ve taken your advice.”

“Even if he did, it might not have changed anything,” Maleki said.

“Maybe,” Amir-Hossein said after a pause. The British and the Americans wanted him gone. The Shah did not like him and neither did the Soviet Union, nor the communist Tudeh Party. He was a man for no season.

“You should see a doctor about it,” I said.

“I’m going abroad to study,” Amir-Hossein said out of nowhere. “I’ve got a scholarship. I’ll leave in a week.”

“Really?” I exclaimed.

“That’s great news,” Maleki said. “Is it from the government?” he asked after a pause.

“I’ve got a scholarship from the Sorbonne University.”

“That’s much better,” Maleki said. “More reliable.” I knew he said that because three decades ago Maleki had received a government scholarship to do his PhD in chemistry in Germany. His scholarship had been discontinued after the embassy had tried to hide the truth behind a student’s death, and Maleki had refused to stay silent.

“Congratulations,” I finally brought myself to say.

The doorbell buzzed.

“Have some cake,” Maleki said.

The bell buzzed again. Maleki looked at the door over his shoulder and through the window, but did not make a move. “Anyone want more tea?” he asked, and the bell buzzed for the third time.

“I’ll get that,” Maleki said to his son, who stopped on his way to the door and returned to his room. I saw him pass the yard through the window. There was a brief exchange before he opened the door fully and let someone in. The man who followed Maleki in stood at the entrance, took a handkerchief out, and cleared the sweat that dripped down his forehead. His deep-set eyes dawned on me, and my gaze slid down his face to his saggy double chin—sad and large as if it gave a home to many un-cried sorrows. I heard his thighs rubbing against each other as he waddled past us in the living room. They stopped in front of a room halfway down the hallway. “Here,” Maleki said, standing at the room entrance, gesturing with his right hand and the man—who had to squeeze himself between Maleki and the wall—turned, and disappeared inside. Maleki came and hovered in the middle of the living room, as if he was not sure what to do next.

“Is this everything?” we heard the man shouting.

“There are some more in the living room,” Maleki said. They were going to move from this house, so he had decided to sell some of his books. They were too much trouble for Sabihe with all the cleaning and packing, and too heavy to drag along wherever they went.

“These are good books, but I can’t pay you too much,” the man said.

“What are you doing? You know that my father always had a thing for your library,” Amir-Hossein said with a nervous smile. Maleki looked at the buyer and then at Amir-Hossein, not knowing how to respond.

“If you didn’t want to sell them, why would you drag me all the way here?”

“I’m sorry,” Maleki said.

“You have no bloody concern for people’s time, huh?” the buyer said, rubbing the sweat off his forehead.

“Don’t talk as if you’ve travelled from another town. I’ve been to your shop, it’s just two blocks down the road,” Amir-Hossein interfered.

“I’m not talking to you. Mind your own business!”

“This *is* my business!”

“No. This is *my* business!” He was indignant. I could tell that for him it was not about books or money any more; he demanded respect. Something that he thought he never received as he deserved, just because of his appearance.

“Okay. You can have them,” Maleki said to the buyer.

“No. He can’t!”

There was something in Amir-Hossein’s tone and eyes that made the room fall silent. The man left, mumbling and cursing under his breath. I heard him banging the door closed.

Amir-Hossein left for the washroom. Maleki left and came back with a bottle of *araq* and a cup. He flopped down into the sofa, his gaze lost amongst the colourful flowers of the carpet.

“We should get going,” Amir-Hossein said when he was back. “I’ll ask my father to send a check for the books. I’ll take them when I come to say goodbye.”

“Okay. I’ll box them up for you,” Maleki said.

*

I accompanied Amir-Hossein to the airport the next week. To make it easier for his parents he had said goodbye to them at home. On the way, he stared out of the cab window in silence.

“All those buildings will be here when you’re back,” I said.

“You never know,” he whispered without turning his head. We did not talk any more until he checked in.

“Would you pay Maleki a visit whenever you are free?” Amir-Hossein asked.

"I'll check on him whenever I can," I said. I had not told him that I was weighing the idea of leaving Tehran for another city.

"A couple of years ago, I was still a young teenager; it was after the coup of 1953, Maleki was just released from prison, and we had a gathering in our house," Amir-Hossein said, as if confessing to a sin. Maleki was saying that they should not let hopelessness get the best of them, that they should analyse the situation by taking a historical perspective and stay optimistic. Someone said that he preferred to take a "geographical" perspective and go somewhere he could live in peace. Maleki responded that even a mule could take a "geographical" perspective and go wherever the grass was greener. However, they needed to stay realistic, and organised, and keep the powers that be in check.

"I think you've made the right decision," I said. "Plus, you'll be back before you know it." I had no faith in my words. We hugged goodbye. I stood there watching him walk away. *People, group of fallen people, low-spirited and drained and stupefied was going from one exile to another under the ominous burden of their corpses…* No! I lit a cigarette, started murmuring a new pop song that was on the radio all the time, and walked off. *I need to distract myself, to give myself some time, and her voice will eventually leave me.* I was young and naive. It never did. She lived through her words now—free and insuppressible.

*

Two weeks after Amir-Hossein's departure, I paid Maleki a visit. On the way, I bought some apples like Amir-Hossein would. I saw Maleki as he was about to leave his house for a nearby bar. From that day onward, every Thursday, I waited for him in front of his house, and then we walked to the bar where we did shots, water for me and *araq* for him, and ate the apples I had on me. During my last five months in Tehran, that was my routine almost every Thursday night.

On the way to the bar, going through the park, branches were swaying back and forth, leaves rustling, wind wailing—the start of a storm. I zipped my jumper and Maleki buttoned his

raincoat and started walking with a hand on his brown bowler hat. “Strange weather for the summer,” he said, and we picked up our pace to reach the bar before it poured.

“Are you alright? You’ve lost weight,” he said.

“I’m okay.”

“Did you colour your hair since we last met?” he asked.

“No. It turned yellowish for no reason.”

“No reason?” he asked. There was a reason, but I did not want to think about it. “You should see a doctor. Meanwhile, watch your diet and sleep.”

How can you tell a man that he is not alive, that he has never been alive… “No!” I almost shouted, but my voice was lost in a gust of wind.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

“How is your study going?”

“I finished it last semester. It took a bit longer than it should have.”

“Looking for a job now?”

“Yes. But not in Tehran.”

“Why do you want to leave?”

“I can’t stand this city any more and I’d like to live somewhere else.”

“What kind of a job are you looking for?”

“Teaching.”

“You know the most important lesson a teacher can teach his students?” he asked. “To help them understand the importance of asking questions.” He believed that we were born with an inherent curiosity. As kids we asked questions, sometimes surprisingly good ones. Then we went to school and swapped that for lots of answers.

“When was the last time you taught?” I asked.

"Ages ago," he said. After the coup, when he was arrested, he had received a letter from the Ministry of Education saying that he was fired. He challenged it in the court and won. Since it was illegal to fire him, to keep him out of the classrooms they put him on the "waiting for service" list and paid his salary. This time when he was arrested, he had received a similar letter. He was fired again. He took it to the court and lost the case this time. After the coup, he had thought we had to start from zero. Fifteen years later, he had realised that we had a lot of work to do to get back to zero. At least we had an independent judiciary system back then. "How is your work at the studio going?"

"I quit working there a while back."

"It was an unfortunate accident. Were you and Forugh close?"

"Not really."

"I wrote a small piece for her fortieth-day memorial, but nowadays whatever has my name on it does not pass censorship, regardless of its content."

Wind is blowing in the alley, this is the beginning of ruin, that day when your hands were ruined, wind was blowing too… "No!" I whispered. *O imprisoned voice, will not glory of your despair tunnel towards light through this loathed night? O imprisoned voice, the last voice of voices…* "No!" I nearly shouted and this time no wind covered it.

"Are you alright?" Maleki asked a bit surprised.

"Sorry. I'm just agitated these days," I said. I did not say that I was suddenly afraid of the dark and of being alone. That was why I was here in the first place; walking with him to a bar, the last place I wanted to be. Why I could not stand a moment of silence, and spent my free time in crowded places where my thoughts were drowned in noise and clamour. Why—embarrassed to leave the light on at night—I took a small torch to bed, left it on under my blanket, and stared at that glistering ray of light until I fell asleep.

If only I was left alone. If only!

During those Thursday nights, we did not talk much. Usually after some small talk, and occasional exchanges of ideas on literature or politics, he asked me whether I had managed to find a job yet, to which I answered "No," and I asked him how his political memoir was going, to which he answered, "It's alright." In less than an hour, he was drunk and we continued doing shots and eating apples in silence. When the last apple was gone, I walked him home, where we shook hands and said goodbye.

One night after finishing the apples, he continued ordering shots. I could not have any more water and went to the toilet. As soon as I sat back down, he started talking about the famous split in the Tudeh Party. He paused, lost track of his thoughts, and repeated himself. I signalled the bartender not to serve him any more and asked for a glass of water, which he drank slowly before we left. On the way back, we sat on a bench in a park so that he could catch his breath.

"You know what they did?"

"Who?"

"They had this article published in a newspaper that condemned the terrorist act and—"

"What terrorist act?" I asked.

"The attempt on the Shah's life," he answered. They had used his name and those of a couple of other reformists, those who were part of the split, to sign it. A win-win game, they assumed. If the reformists denied the article, they had somehow approved the assassination. If they kept quiet, they could be labelled as monarchists. That was how dirty those bastards played! "I'm talking about the head of the party, of course, not those…" He fell silent and then narrowed his eyes as if trying to remember something "...*and I'm coming from a world of apathetic thoughts and…*"

He had tried to recite Forugh's poetry, and his confused mind had failed him. I did it for him.

And I'm coming from a world of apathetic thoughts, words, and voices,

and this world is like a den of snakes,

and this world is filled with echoes of steps of those,

who while kissing you,

weave the rope of your execution in their minds.

I stopped, but he was still nodding his head approvingly. I lent him a hand to get on his feet and we walked back home.

*

The next week in the bar was all drinking and almost no talking. He did not even eat any apples. There was a man sitting next to us at the bar who tried to initiate a conversation with Maleki a couple of times with no success. Occasionally he would turn to Maleki to say something nonetheless. The scar on his left cheek, raw as if caused by an object not sharp enough for a clear cut, and the suppressed rage in his eyes unnerved me. Regardless, I tried to distract him from Maleki, but he was not interested in words I had to offer.

"You don't like talking or you don't like talking to me?" he said to Maleki finally.

"I think he is—"

"I asked *him*!"

I was hoping Maleki would break his silence and say something. Anything.

"No problem talking…" he said and fell silent again. I was looking for something to say when he continued, "I don't like…"

"What?" the scar-face asked.

"Rhetoric, it's just…and you know?"

"I know what?" he asked again.

"He's just too drunk. Have an apple," I said.

He pushed back the brown paper and got on with his drink, looking confused and irritated.

"Come on! Time to go home," I said.

Maleki stood up and took out some money to put on the counter. A piece of paper, folded in four, dropped out of his pocket. He left for the bathroom without saying anything. I picked up the paper and unfolded it. It was a two-page letter.

To my dear friend Amir Pishdad,

Hope this letter finds you well. I'm waiting for my eye surgery and for a while I can't read or write much. I took a friend's dog for a walk yesterday. It reminded me of that one day we took your dog for a walk in Paris. It was a beautiful summer day and we had a productive talk. Every time I remember that day it brings a smile to my face. Anyway, enough of chitchat and back to the business.

Almost eight years ago, I wrote a letter to former Prime Minister, Mosaddegh. I did that because even after years of house arrest, Mosaddegh was still the spiritual leader of the National Front and was respected by friends and foes alike. At the end of that letter, I said that despite being sixty I was still fully committed to working towards the objectives and goals of the National Movement, i.e., social justice and independence. Even a year ago when Mossadegh passed, despite all the troubles we had visiting his tomb, and the sadness that overcame me while sitting at his tomb thinking about a great man who was denied a grave and had to be buried in his own living room, I still felt motivated to work, write, and organise. But my body has been failing me for a while. Moreover, the system moves from dictatorship to an arbitrary rule, which makes political activities even more challenging. My hope is in people like you, my friend. As the secretary of Iranian Socialists in Europe, I think you…

I skipped a few paragraphs. …*Regarding your open letter to th*e *Tudeh Party: on the one hand, there are certain wrongdoings you've accused them of, which I personally think are not fair. On the other hand, they have done some harm that you have failed to mention…* I skipped

to the last lines. …*However, there are moments in which the part of me that refuses to accept defeat, that pushes me to work despite everything, tells me that I may live long enough to see the fruits of what I have worked for...*

The bathroom door opened. I folded the letter back up and passed it back to him. He whispered something and put it in his pocket. I asked for a glass of water. He drank it in one breath, water running down his chin, and we left the bar.

*

I met Maleki at his house after his eye surgery. His left eye was covered and bandaged by a plastic dome. Sabihe brought us tea and dried dates, then left us to talk. Maleki's head followed her and whispered, "Without her, I was lost years ago."

"There are times I feel empty," I said to my surprise.

"There are times we all do, I suppose," he said. His first time in prison, they had decided to read and discuss *Capital*. His wife arranged for a German copy of the book to be smuggled into the prison, where one of the guards hid it in a corner of the prison yard. During their break, five or six of them formed a human shield while somebody dug it out and smuggled some pages inside. He would read it, translate it and share it with others. After every session, they shredded the pages, grabbed a handful and while walking in the yard let the pieces slide out of their fingers. They were in prison for being "communists" while the prison yard had been literally covered in Marx's words. "During my time there I felt hopeless, angry, sad, helpless, but somehow never empty. It's not about where we are in life, but what we do, I guess."

"I see."

"Let me tell you a joke I've just heard," he said. "A doctor advises one of his patients with heart problems and high cholesterol to walk five kilometres every day. After a couple of months his patient calls him and says, *I am at the border now, what should I do next*?"

I could not recall when was the last time that I had laughed, not just with my mouth but also with my heart.

“I have no sense of humor myself, but I appreciate it in others,” Maleki said.

“It helps us keep going,” I said.

“I think we can relate to comedy because tragedy, which we are accustomed to, is nothing but comedy pushed too far,” he said. He knew this ex-army officer, Baharmast, who was working as a lawyer in the military court. He had defended a couple of political activists in an honest and uncompromising fashion. He also liked to mock the court and its made-up charges in not-so-subtle ways. Of course, he had to pay for that. Later on, he was accused of being a womaniser—whereas it was known that he did not even like women. A comedy. Then, based on that ridiculous charge, he was sent to jail for three years, became a hardcore drug addict after his release, and died alone. A tragedy. “I have a throbbing pain in my left eye.”

“I’ll leave you to take some rest.”

“We’ll chat soon,” he said.

*

Over the next couple of months Maleki went downhill. He had to have one more eye surgery and I could see it in his face that he was sick of being sick all the time. Two weeks before leaving Tehran forever, I waited for him outside his house as usual. He did not show up. I left without ringing the bell so as not to face his wife. She was a retired teacher and one of those people who could see right through your mind.

The week after I was there again, for the last time. He did not show up. I did not want to leave without saying goodbye, and after a while, I decided to check the bar. On the way there, taking the usual shortcut through the park, I saw him sitting on a bench, his head hanging over his chest, his body tilted to the right. He had started early. I woke him up, grabbed his arm and walked him back home. I had walked him home before, but this time he felt heavier (in sleep,

a body will grow heavier than normal. One would know that if one ever tried to carry a sleeping child to bed). I could see he was struggling to keep his eyes open, but it was not sleep, of course. It was much heavier than that. It was death seeping into his body with every breath.

Sabihe opened the door. Without a word, she grabbed his left arm; Noruz ran and took his right arm out of my hand. The door was closed on me. When it was open I could see boxes piled on top of each other in the living room.

Chapter Thirteen

I had booked a train ticket for the evening. My luggage was packed and ready in my room. After lunch, I leaned against the plane tree in front of our house to smoke a cigarette one last time. As a teenager, it had provided me with shade for hours of reading books and waiting for Forugh to pass by. A silent witness to my malady and ache.

On the street, kids—still in their school uniforms—had marked two goals with their schoolbags and were playing football, running after a striped plastic ball. Amongst them, I recognised Hosein, Forugh's adopted son. From the very beginning, he had had to move to Forugh's parents' house since she was busy all the time. I remembered the day when Hosein had come to the studio with Forugh for the first time. That morning Ibrahim was working on his latest film, *The sea.* In one of the scenes Forugh was slapped by the male leading role a few times, to get the best take. Forugh pointed at the screen and said, "Do you see how this man is slapping your mum?" Hosein looked at the screen and then at her in perplexity and said nothing. There was something in that moment of Hosein's silence, confusion, and uncertainty that I could relate to. I smashed the remainder of my cigarette, shoved it with my forefinger into the wet soil, and walked towards the kids.

"Hello," I said. Hosein raised his head. "Do you remember me?" I asked. He nodded. "Do you want to go for an ice cream?"

"Can he come too?" he pointed at another kid. He was taller, a bit older, and with a fluffy teenage moustache was about to hit puberty.

"Sure," I said. We started walking together.

"Are you happy living here?"

"Yes."

“Do you miss Forugh?” I said, not knowing why I would ask a child such a question.

“Yes.”

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“Why?”

“Nothing,” I said. “And what’s your name?” I asked Hosein’s friend.

“Aria.”

I continued speaking to Aria so as not to make him feel left out. However, there was something strange about the way he talked which took me a while to pin it down. He did not use any Arabic words, which made him sound pompous, especially for his age.

“Why do you talk like that?”

“My father says that everyone should talk like this. We are Persian, not Arab.”

“But many of those Arabic words are part of our language, probably more than some dated Persian ones.”

“Are you a Muslim?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why you’re so in love with Arabs,” he said, turned, and walked away. I was annoyed with his immature reasoning, with his naive search for purity. Nevertheless, I wanted to run after him, hug his tense and confused body and tell him that everything would be alright.

“Is he your close friend?” I asked Hosein.

“He is a nice guy. It’s just that the other kids make fun of him all the time.”

We walked for a while in silence until we reached the shop, where I bought an ice cream sandwich for him.

“Who’s taking care of you these days?” I asked on the way back.

“Grandma Turan.”

“Are you in touch with your parents?”

“I call them every month. I also write letters.”

“They don’t ask you to go back?”

“They say that they want me to study and be successful in the future.”

“Forugh was a really good poet.”

“Yes.”

“You should learn a couple of languages.”

“Why?”

“So you can translate Forugh’s poems. Then many people, all over the world, could read her poetry and she would be remembered. I think she’d like that. I think all artists would like that. I guess that’s kind of the whole point.”

“Okay. I’ll do that,” he said, and licked his ice cream.

“By the way, what’s your favourite food?”

“Hosein!” we heard someone shouting. Turan ran towards us and slapped him before she got on her knees and hugged him tight. “Where have you been?”

We had been away less than an hour, but there were no kids on the street anymore. “I’m sorry. I should've let you know first,” I said.

*

I moved to Mashhad. I had not secured a job yet, but I could not stand living in Tehran anymore. A family friend, who was about to retire, had told me that he might be able to get me a job in his high school to teach literature. That “might” was enough for me to leave. He did what he could, but I had to teach for two years in Neyshabur before I was offered a teaching position in Mashhad. A couple of months after moving to Neyshabur, I married your mother, the daughter of the same family friend who had offered me help to get a job.

I had not heard from Amir-Hossein since he had moved to France, except for two letters during the first few months, and I was surprised when he phoned me in Neyshabur. I thought that maybe he had called to congratulate me on my marriage.

"Maleki has passed," he said.

"I'm really sorry."

"I talked to him a few weeks ago. He was at my parents' house for dinner. He said that despite being old he was still looking to the future. His voice worried me, but I chose to look at his words. I should've come back. Now he is gone."

"He had a serious heart condition. You couldn't do anything. No one could."

"Did you know that when I left, I did not even say goodbye to him?"

"Yeah," I said. He did not ask me how I knew. I did not hear of Amir-Hossein again for another three decades.

*

After the demonstrations of June 1963, I had refrained from politics altogether and turned into a keen observer, a fan at most. In Mashhad my metamorphosis was completed. I turned into my father. I stuck to my own business, teaching, and did my compulsory religious duties. I visited Entezari every time I travelled to Tehran to see my parents, which was not that often, since they were coming to Mashhad for pilgrimage quite regularly. Two years before the Revolution, my parents relocated to Mashhad permanently, as they had always wished to live next to Imam Reza Holy Shrine. When I drove to Tehran to help my parents move to Mashhad, I met Entezari for the last time.

It was after hearing the radio anchor reading the historic message "This is Tehran, the real voice of Iran, voice of revolution…" that I called Entezari, to congratulate him. He was beside himself. The last sentence he said before we said goodbye was, "The Islamic *Republic* of Iran! Finally!"

Plato, previously hidden in our minds and souls without us knowing, was everywhere now.

*

I did not talk with Entezari that often afterwards. As a well-known revolutionary figure, he was occupied by numerous responsibilities during the first few years after the revolution. He was chosen as a member of the Assembly of Experts, which was in charge of drafting the new constitution. That was when Entezari managed to introduce the doctrine of *velayat-e faqih*, the guardianship of the jurisconsult, into the constitution. Now the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, had not only spiritual but also temporal authority. Every week, I watched his live sermons during his time as the imam of Friday Prayer held at the University of Tehran every weekend. He was actively involved in building the utopia he had envisioned and had spent years laying down the theoretical foundations of.

For a while, there were even rumours that Entezari was the favourite candidate to succeed Ayatollah Khomeini and to become the next Supreme Leader. However, it did not take long before the tension between him and the regime started, and escalated faster than anybody expected. I was not surprised, though. He was still the same person I remembered: frank, uncompromising, and outspoken. He and the regime reached the breaking point when he objected to the execution of members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation in prison, approved by the Supreme Leader. Entezari was labelled a counter-revolutionary, his house was stoned by a mob of "common folks" who were concerned about "true ideals of the Revolution", and he was put under house arrest. After that I did not talk to him for more than a decade.

Two weeks before Entezari's death, we spoke for the last time. One of our common friends, who had come to pay pilgrimage to Imam Reza, had brought me a letter from Entezari. He said that Entezari had a stroke and his condition was deteriorating. Apparently, he had also had a heart attack two years earlier. He did not have much time left. Since then, every time I feel down I read the letter. It still gives me hope and brings me joy. I can recite it word by word.

In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.

My dear son,

I hope you are doing well. During the last two decades, I have been facing many unjust accusations. Those in power did whatever they could to soil my name, simply because I dared to think independently and for them it is the biggest sin one can commit. I always talked to you about the importance of unity. But in our days and time uniformity is mistaken for unity.

I was accused of having sympathy for the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation when the same group had assassinated my own nephew. I just believed that the members of the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation who were already tried and sentenced to prison should not be tried again for treason and executed because their organisation had joined forces with the Iraqi army and had attacked Iran. You cannot be punished for someone else's wrongdoings even if you are affiliated with them. It has such a simple logic and is in agreement with our Islamic teachings. However, they chose to ignore it.

The most preposterous accusation was me being against the guardianship of the jurisconsult. Me! The same person who has spent his life laying the foundations of the doctrine. I still believe in the doctrine of the guardianship of the jurisconsult. But I do not believe that he is above the law; his authority and responsibility is defined by it. According to the constitution—and I was among those who wrote it—the vote of people is the basis of the government and even the position of the guardianship is nothing but a contract between the people and a jurisconsult who can be disposed by people at any time.

During my life, before and after the Revolution, I tried to defend people's rights and worked for the independence and honour of this country. I criticised the regime because I could not witness the principles of the Revolution being undermined. I have lived according to Quran, the tradition of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and my conscience. God is aware of what is

in our hearts, and he himself would judge us on resurrection day, the only judgment that really matters.

You may wonder, why I am writing this to you then? Because you are one of the few people whom I would care how they remember me after my death. Because you have always been my son, even when you distanced yourself from me and decided to take another path. I was disappointed at first, only because I missed our time together and your enthusiasm for knowledge and justice that brought me joy. However, you need to know that I am proud of you for maintaining a decent life. For living a humble life and doing the best you could away from the sound and the fury of power.

May Mercy and Blessings of God be Upon You,

Your father,

Hossein-Ali Entezari

I called him the next morning. He could barely talk. When I wished him a prompt recovery he said, "This time, there's no recovery, my son."

"You'll recover soon, inshallah."

"First my heart and now my brain. These are vital for any system to be functioning properly."

I understood what he meant. "You're absolutely right," I said.

"I might be right. But I am not *absolutely* right," he replied. I could picture him smiling at the other end of the line. I knew the conversation was being taped, but there was a question that I wanted to ask him for years and this could be my last chance.

"Why did you object to the executions? Wouldn't it have been better for the people and the future of the country if you had kept quiet and stayed in power?"

“There’s no future if you can’t sleep at night,” he said. At this point of the conversation, I could hear him breathing heavily. “I never thought that one could lose by winning—” There was a long pause, a struggle to get oxygen in “—and win by losing.”

*

“This is everything,” he said. “Everything which is worth saying.”

I leaned back in my seat and took a deep breath. “What happened to Hasan? Are you two still in touch?” I asked.

“Let’s talk about that another time,” he said.

“You wanted me to hear your story and I’m listening now. Why don’t you finish it?” I pushed despite (or maybe because of) his drawn face.

“Okay. Let’s get it done with,” he said, his forehead wrinkled, his eyes fixed, contemplating, as if wondering how to finish.

*

Hasan was among those members of Mojahedin-e Khalq who were tried again and executed when in prison in the summer of 1988. He was always anti-Shah, but it was me who introduced him to Ayatollah Entezari, who gave him a direction and a sense of purpose. He might never have got actively involved in politics if it was not for me. I did not recite Entezari ’s letter word by word. He started his letter talking about Hasan. He thought that I had stopped contacting him because I blamed him for Hasan’s death. Entezari had tried to postpone the executions to after the holy month of Muharram, hoping he could use the time to lobby. He did what he could, not just for the sake of Hasan but for justice, and failed.

I had not stopped calling him because I blamed him for Hasan’s execution; I knew his phone was tapped and I was afraid to have my name on a blacklist. I still inquired about his wellbeing through our mutual friends and sent my regards. Maybe he did not receive my messages, or assumed that I was just being polite. When I called him that one last time, I did not dare to

mention Hasan's name. I asked that question about why he did not keep quiet about the executions partly to show him that I understood: that I knew he did more than most people would have. I hoped that he got my hint.

*

After I relocated to Mashhad, I met Hasan every year for one week when he came to pay pilgrimage to Imam Reza and stayed with us. It was during his last visit before the Islamic Revolution when I learnt that he had joined the radical anti-Shah organisation of Mojahedin-e Khalq. He did his routine of pilgrimage for another three years after the Revolution. The fourth year, however, he was arrested shortly after the Mojahedin-e Khalq Organisation had declared war on the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I was so worried he might be executed that when I received a phone call from his brother and learnt about his sentence, I was relieved. He was not directly involved in armed activities and assassinations and therefore was sentenced to eight years in prison.

"Thank God!" I said.

"Yes! He got lucky this time," his brother said.

His luck did not last for long.

When Mojahedin-e Khalq joined forces with the Iraqi army during the war, Hasan had two years before his release. He—like other political prisoners who were kept isolated from the outside world—had not heard of the act of treason committed by the Organisation. When he was taken to be re-tried—which was nothing but three questions to test his loyalty to the Organisation—he had no idea that answers to those questions would seal his fate.

I heard the news of his execution from his brother.

That night, I was lying in bed thinking about Hasan in prison, having his last meal, using his spoon to engrave circles on the wall of his cell. I could not fall asleep. I got out of bed and walked to the front yard. I sat on the stairs and lit a cigarette, my first in seven years. I looked

at the full moon, elegant and indifferent, and took a drag. “Vanity, vanity, it’s all vanity,” I sobbed.

Chapter Fourteen

He stood up and walked to the washroom. He was not going to let me see the tears rolling down his face. The apartment smelt of him. It smelt of slow decay and inconsolable pain. I wished I could bring myself to hug the weary old man in front of me and console him. I wished I could kiss his wrinkled face and tell him that he would have peace, and not just the one promised by death. I wished I could tell him that everything was good and he was forgiven.

I left the apartment, walked to a nearby gas station, and bought a pack of cigarettes. I lit one sitting on the ground, leaning against the glass window, hugging my knees, observing the slow nightlife playing out in front of my eyes like a sad show of loneliness, insomnia, and unsatisfied cravings. I smoked another one and then one more. It seemed that now that I had broken my promise it did not matter how many I smoked.

When I returned home, I could not find him in the unit. Having remembered what happened a few days back, I dashed for the door without calling his name; then I noticed the light coming from under the bathroom door. I found him lying in the bath, his eyes closed.

"Hello?"

It was as if he jolted awake out of a dream. "Can you help me? I sat down and I couldn't stand up again."

I knew it was not the whole truth. He covered his genitals with his left hand and offered me the right one. The water was cold. I passed him a towel before I brought the hair dryer over and blew some hot air on his body. I asked the question that I knew the answer to.

"What is going on?"

He hesitated for a moment. "You know what's going on, Saeed." He sat at the table.

"Are you…"

“Yes. I am.”

“How long have you known?”

“Almost a year.”

“Is there anything that can be done?”

“I’m taking some medicine, but it only slows it down.”

“Do you want to consult a doctor, now that you are here?”

“No.”

“But there is no harm in seeking a second opinion.”

“I know that when I’m dead, I’m no different from this piece of wood,” he said, tapping on the table.

“But you don’t miss a single prayer!”

“I can only pray that I’m wrong,” he answered, smiling. His eyes glimmered with wisdom for a second before the darkness took over again.

A long silence.

“During your youth, there are elements of the fear of death in the way you cling to your religious beliefs as if your life is depending on it. Even though when you are young you don’t think about death—not directly at least. When you are middle-aged, you wish for your youth, you secretly wish you would never die. When you are old you just want to be able to face it with serenity and dignity.”

“Anything I can do?”

“I wish you could hold my hands when I’m walking to the dark side. But this is life. What can we do?”

“I can always come back.”

“You can’t take the risk.”

“Nobody really cares about a damn novel!”

“Maybe they do, maybe they don’t, you never know. Sometimes nothing can make you discipline yourself like not knowing. I want you to do something for me though.”

“Okay.”

“The story I told you, I want you to write it down.” He looked into my eyes.

I was still not sure that I had heard him right, and looked at him for a few seconds before I said, “I’m really not sure if I want to deal with—”

“I know I’m asking for too much. But if you ever bring yourself to write it down, wait until I’m gone before publishing it.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“I discovered her and God almost at the same time. She left me years ago. Now I’m losing my memory and with that God is abandoning me too. Do you remember I told you about the day when I followed her on the street? I told you she turned and I hid behind a tree. When you write that scene, I want her to see me hiding, to recognise me. I want her to smile before she turns and walks away,” he said, and smiled as his eyes glimmered with a passing excitement.

I nodded, though I was not sure what I was exactly agreeing to.

*

I was staring at the ceiling, sleepless. I had listened to his breathing turning to a faint snore while trying to find a comfortable position on the sofa. That was not the real reason for my insomnia, though. I had slept on the same sofa for almost two weeks now. It was my restless brain. I removed the sheet and sat on the edge of the sofa. I could distinguish his silhouette, lying on his back on the bed near the balcony door. His torso was lit by moonlight, by billions of photons travelling through space from sun to moon for millions of kilometres, only to be reflected again towards Earth, and his legs were in the dark, representing those that failed to finish their journey, foiled by the wall only a few metres away.

I tiptoed to my table, sat, plugged in my headset, and turned on my laptop. I typed, *The house is black.* The movie popped up on YouTube. It was only twenty-two minutes.

Why a movie about leprosy, though? About outcasts? Did she feel like an outcast herself? That cannot be why she made that movie—producing a movie depends on many factors—but it was probably why she made it well. She had a good understanding of how it felt to live your life like an outsider. In her own way, she understood the lepers and their world and in return they related to her, trusted her, and let her be their voice.

"There is no shortage of ugliness in the world. If humans closed their eyes to them, there would be more…a dreadful image, a vision of pain will appear on this screen that no compassionate humans should close their eyes to. Finding a remedy for this unsightly condition and relieving the pain of its victims is the motive behind making this film and the wish of the producers," says the voiceover.

I sat there watching the movie, daydreaming at times. In my reverie I envisioned my father: staying behind the filming crew, leaning against a wall, lighting a cigarette, smoking away his unrequited love, looking at Forugh who was talking to the cameraman, walking around ceaselessly, engaging people of the community in conversations, and planning the next scene…

"Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made," her voice read over the pictures of the day-to-day life in the asylum. In one of the final scenes of the movie, filmed in a classroom, the teacher asked a student, "Why should one thank God for having father and mother?"

"I don't know. I have neither," answered the student.

The teacher looked at one of the students, who I thought to be Hosein, and said, "Name a few beautiful things."

"The moon, sun, flower, and playing," he answered.

"Name a few ugly things," teacher asked another student.

"Hand, foot, and head," he answered, other students giggling. Teacher asked a student to write a sentence with the word "house" in it on the blackboard. The scene cut to community members seeing off the camera until a door closed down on them. Then a cut back to the classroom as the student wrote, *The house is black.*

*

He woke me up at noon. I had watched *The house is black* twice, and then listened to Forugh's voice reciting some of her own poetry. I went to bed again at 3:40 am, but the last time I checked the clock, frustrated with my insomnia, it was 5:10 am.

"I thought we had a lunch appointment today," he said.

My whole body ached for some more rest. I texted Ellie and let her know that we might be late by fifteen minutes.

We meet Ellie at Ayla's cafe. He could not communicate with her beyond basics and I had to work as a translator between the two of them. It seemed that the fact that they did not have to talk directly, but through a third person they both knew and trusted, worked as an icebreaker.

"Saeed didn't tell me that you're Chinese," he said at some point. Ellie's parents had migrated from Taiwan when she was two. I guessed that she had possibly recognised the word "Chinese" so I took the liberty to translate it as "He thinks that Chinese girls are beautiful."

"Thank you. You yourself are good-looking too. Now I know from whom Saeed has got his good looks."

He asked Ellie about her job and a few questions about her family. I could sense that she was happy that he had taken an interest in her personal life. "I think your son is a great guy. I do love him," Ellie said, and smiled, one of those vivid smiles which made me feel that life was not all doom and gloom.

"Very good. But I personally think that love is overrated," he said.

It took me a second or two to come up with, “Great! I think every relationship should be based on love.”

Ellie’s eyes shone and she smiled at him before she tilted her head towards me to kiss me. I pretended I had not noticed that, pushed my chair back and stood up. “Time for some shopping now,” I said, smiling at Ellie.

He had bought some clothes for my mother and some packs of tea for his friends, those he caught up with in a nearby park for a chat and went to the mosque with every day.

“We did some good shopping today,” Ellie said.

“Yes, thanks to you,” I said.

“I got you something,” she said and offered a plastic bag to him. There was a blue-checked shirt inside. His face showed that he had appreciated the gesture. “Thank you,” he said.

She hugged him goodbye, which I could tell made him uncomfortable, but less than I thought it would.

“Take good care,” she said.

“You too. Take care of yourself and Saeed. I’m happy he has you.”

He said the last sentence in English. Ellie’s face brightened. She hugged him again. We watched her walking off for a second and then turned away.

*

“Sorry for some of the stuff I said. I didn’t mean to embarrass you,” he said. We are sitting on a bench in a park. Initially, we planned to go home after Ellie left. But we decided against it.

“It’s alright.”

“I’m too old and I just say whatever comes to my mind.”

“It’s fine. I’m sorry that I changed your words.”

“You did the right thing. She looks like a nice girl.”

"I just don't know what you meant by love being overrated. You don't believe that people can love each other?"

"Yes, they can. But for a relationship to work you need more than love. Love withers over time; that's its nature. And there's one more thing that I've understood about love. The afterlife to life is like love is to sex."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not even sure. Forget it. Do you remember the first computer I bought for you?"

"Yeah. A Pentium III, the latest model at the time."

"You taught me how to use the computer and the internet and made me an email account. Forugh was the first name I searched for. I found a biography on her by an American professor, named Hillmann. I asked Amir-Hossein to post it to me. Two years before, he'd surprised me with a visit. It was his first time back home after the Revolution. He was running some workshops on the philosophy of non-violence at the University of Tehran."

"Did you read the book?"

"With a dictionary at my side it took me a year to finish it. Did you know Forugh was learning painting from Katuzian for a while during her teenage years?"

"*The* Katuzian?"

"Yeah. During a session, after she finishes a painting, Katuzian tries to make some corrections. She objects that he wants to force her to paint like him, leaves, and never returns. A fourteen-year-old! That was why she never got intimidated by big names or spellbound by any ideology. Why at the end she was like no one else but Forugh Farrokhzad."

"You never told me about his visit."

"You were at the University of Tehran at the time."

"Exactly! I could have gone to his lectures."

“I preferred that you stayed away from any activities that could have been labelled as political. Amir-Hossein passed me a draft of the biography he was writing on Khalil Maleki, but we never got a chance to really talk about it.”

“Why?”

“He was arrested and interrogated by the Ministry of Intelligence. He was accused of being part of a colour revolution to overthrow the Islamic Republic. He confessed to what he was accused of and was released after three months, mostly because of national and international pressures. He left Iran in a hurry and is back in Canada now.”

“Did you like the book?”

“I wrote to him about what I thought of it. He said he would only publish it if he thought he’d done Maleki justice. I’m not sure if he ever published it. We should go back home now. My flight is in a few hours.”

*

He did not want to risk missing his flight and we were at the airport almost three hours before the flight. We sat at the only free table at the airport cafe, near the entrance, where the sun had warmed the chairs.

He took an aspirin with his tea.

“You can’t sleep nonstop for too long,” I said. I knew he was going to take sleeping pills and sleep throughout the flight anyway.

“Is there anything you’d like to ask me before I leave?”

“If there is anything, we can always talk over the phone.”

“I knew things wouldn’t be the same.”

“I just need some time,” I said. I needed much more than that. I needed to open my eyes at some point and realise that everything had been just a bad dream.

“There’s one last thing.” He passed me a folded paper. It was brown and covered in yellow spots. I was afraid it might fall apart any second and unfolded the battered, saw-edged paper slowly. I could barely read anything save for a few words. It was the handwritten copy of “Sin”.

“Wow!” I said involuntarily.

I looked at his hand going to his pants pocket again, and I thought, *What’s next?* He put the tiny handle of a switchblade knife on the table. A keychain was hanging from it. The blade was missing.

“I don’t even know why I’m giving you these. I can’t bring myself to throw them away and I can’t stand the thought that after my death when your mother is sorting my stuff out, even if she notices them, she’ll dump them. Maybe they can inspire you one way or another if you write the story.”

I sat there staring at the handle of a knife whose missing blade had touched the tire of Forugh’s car, and I wanted to ask him if… And I remembered “Thou shalt not ask!” I refolded the paper and placed it in my shirt pocket. I put the handle in my jumper pocket. He took out a pill and swallowed it on the first sip of the second cup.

“If you are planning to sleep on the plane, let me get us another pot of tea. You need to stay hydrated.”

I came back with another pot and poured him a cup. With every sip the wrinkles between his eyebrows deepened, and the corners of his eyes narrowed as if he was contemplating something. What, I wondered. I did not ask though. I already had enough.

“You know what made her different from others?” he asked as if talking to himself. “She was a believer. She left the certainty of her comfortable domestic life and walked right into the darkness, when the one thing she was certain of was what she *did not* want to be for the rest of her life: a housewife. She longed to turn herself into someone or something of which she had

no clear idea. Only a true believer takes such a leap of faith." He put his cup down and we got on our feet. "I'm sorry for the pain my story has caused you."

I had this image from my childhood. He was sitting next to the heater in the living room, my head on his lap. He was sipping tea and reading poetry, stroking my hair. "We learn and grow through pain," I said. "There seems to be no other way."

We were in the queue when I realised that I did not have my mobile on me. I ran back towards the cafe. My mobile was still on the table next to the pot. I was about to run back when I noticed an ink-stained, crumpled tissue paper on the floor. I picked it up and spread it open on the table. It was written on with a fountain pen. The words were not clear, but I still managed to read it. It was in Farsi.

A cup of tea,
fragrance of cinnamon,
apple-flavored steam defying gravity,
playful patterns by the warm sun on the table,
a leap inside me to feel blessed,
a happy fall!

I folded the tissue and put in my pocket, next to the handwritten copy of "Sin".

*

I watched him going through customs. He looked smaller than ever, letting his coat hang from his gaunt shoulders, embracing him like a child.

There is an alley
where the boys who were in love with me, still

with the same tangled hair and slim necks and thin legs,

are thinking of the innocent smiles of a girl

who was taken away with the wind one night.

He was trudging his path before he stopped and turned, a relieved smile on his face. His eyes shimmered like the prayer beads in his hand. I waved goodbye and faintly smiled.

"Dad …" I almost shouted. "It was not worth it."

He nodded as his smile deepened. "You took a leap of faith, my son," he said, his eyes flickering.

I knew I would not see him again.

A Passage through Sin: Life and Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad

Volume 1: The Novel

Only sound remains

and

Volume 2: The Exegesis

Forugh Farrokhzad: of 'Sin' and her demons

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Thesis Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Submitted November 2020

Table of Contents

A Passage through Sin: Life and Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad

Volume 2: The Exegesis

Forugh Farrokhzad: of 'Sin' and her demons

1. Introduction

1.1 Introductory background

The owl of Minerva spreads its wings

only with the falling of the dusk.

—Friedrich Hegel

Forugh Farrokhzad was born in Iran in 1935. Her poetic life, her journey to give birth to the self as a work of art, started with "Sin", one of her first published poems. Farrokhzad was part of a new tradition of poetry that came into being during the middle of the twentieth century in Iran: female poets who generated new poetry based on personal experience, sensuality, and self-awareness (Milani, 1992, p. 127). Her autobiographical and self-revealing poetry provided the most unprecedented and uncompromising voice of the movement, not least through an explicitly confessional style, especially notable within a society where confession is neither part of its Islamic tradition nor culturally praised (Milani, 2002, p. 623). Farrokhzad's poems rejected the double standard between men and women and undermined the seemingly indisputable values of the patriarchal Iranian society of the time. Farrokhzad refused to follow the customary definition of womanhood in either her life or her poetry, which, in conjunction with her autobiographical poems on women's sexuality, made her all the more vulnerable in the male-dominated society of Iran. Whatever the price, she always felt obliged to stay honest to herself and her art as a source of self-discovery. As she said in an interview: "I do not search for anything in my poems. Rather, in my own poems I discover myself" (Hillmann, 1986, p. 142).

Farrokhzad bore the consequences of this throughout her life. She was verbally ridiculed and abused, lost custody of her only son, was betrayed and scandalised by her lovers, was constantly plagued by bouts of depression, was admitted to a psychiatric hospital, attempted suicide, and lived her life in the shadow of malicious gossip. This never stopped her journey of self-discovery and creativity. Instead, she posed the rhetorical question: "Why should I stop, why?" in one of her last poems, "Only Sound Remains".

Farrokhzad was born into a family of nine. She fell in love and married at the age of sixteen, and was divorced three years later. Her first collection, *The captive*, appeared in 1955 and portrayed the despair and confusion of a woman who was torn apart by the conflicting demands of being a wife and mother alongside her urge to be an artist (Milani, 1992, p. 134). Her decision to leave her husband came with a price. She was under constant social and economic pressure that culminated in a nervous breakdown and admittance to a psychiatric hospital (Milani, 1992, p. 134). *The wall* (1956), her second work, evokes her sense of entrapment and confusion at this time. It was only after publishing her third book, *Rebellion* (1958), that she established herself as a talented poet in the public domain (Oehler-Stricklin, 2005, p. 2). However, it is in *Another birth* (1964) where we see a woman who has freed her writing from both literary and social conventions and writes with no obvious sense of guilt and no concern for classical forms. The poems in this volume, despite remaining highly personal, are more concerned with the social and political malaise of Iranian society, suggesting the birth of a socially conscious poet. Her premature death, at the peak of her creativity, eliminated the opportunity to witness how this newly found sense of freedom would have translated into poetic expression. *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold*

season, her final, posthumous collection, depicts a disillusioned individual well aware of the painful consequences of seeking self-awareness and individuality.

And this is me	و این منم
a lonely woman	زنی تنها
at the threshold of a cold season	در آستانهٔ فصلی سرد
coming to understand the soiled existence of earth	در ابتدای درک هستی آلودهٔ زمین
and the sad innocent despair of the sky	و یأس ساده و غمگین آسمان
and the impotence of these concrete hands (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 11).	و ناتوانی این دستهای سیمانی

1.2 A voice of her own

It has always been a challenge for women to have their voices heard; the more patriarchal the society is, the more arduous the challenge. The patriarchal society of Iran has created generations of veiled and religiously subjugated women; it is a man's world. Unveiled women have been mostly restricted to men's imagination and fantasy, where they could be approached safely. The unexpected presence of a bold, unveiled woman caused agitation and confusion and was viewed, in the main, as an intrusion. The contemporary Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad provides a perfect example of such an intruder.

Biographies written on Farrokhzad provide numerous examples of the excessive responses that the novelty of her poetry, in terms of both form and content and her unconventional life choices, evoked. Hillmann (1986, p. 17), in his biography *A lonely woman*, asserts:

> The immediacy and intensity of reader reaction to the personal, autobiographical voice in *The Captive* derived in large measure, of course, from their unprecedented feminine character.

Hillmann refers to the fact that the poetic voices of those few female poets in Persian literature prior to Farrokhzad were not gender-specific; the female persona was meticulously veiled and there was no trace of their private life or personal feelings in the poems. Hillmann (1986, p. 61) further writes:

> [Farrokhzad] seems to have seen sexual prejudice, double standards, harassment … In some cases, attitudes and behaviour seem so sexist as to strike readers as perhaps manufactured or as [an] exaggeration a biographer might make to evoke sympathy from readers for his or her subject.

At a time when most poets and writers wrote about social issues and political freedom, Farrokhzad's poetry initiated an unprecedented discourse on women's sexuality from a feminine perspective. This was a controversial poetic act in a society where women's sexuality was not acknowledged outside of the constitution of marriage. Farrokhzad wrote about love, lust, and desire at a very personal level. She used the confessing "I" in a culture where a sharp separation between the language of the private and the public prevailed. Her relentless attempts to locate and give poetic form to individual identity in a culture predicated on collective identity (particularly for women) alienated her and made her increasingly vulnerable to dominant social forces and norms.

The response of Muslim fundamentalists was hostile; to them, cultural authenticity depended on keeping the traditional relationship between men and women intact (Milani, 1992, p. 128). However, the reaction of some of the most liberal intellectuals of Iran, including those who had always openly supported gender equality and women's empowerment, was more peculiar. Ali Shari'ati, for example, a Sorbonne graduate, socialist, historian, and passionate supporter of women's rights, had vocally denounced men for suppressing women. He argued that men had always treated women as an untameable "savage animal" who cannot be educated and therefore has to be caged. Nevertheless, he found Westernised women like Farrokhzad appalling, since they "neither have the feelings of our own women of yesterday nor the intelligence of Western women of today" (Milani, 1992, p. 134). Another example is Al-e-Ahmad, one of the prominent authors of modern Iran, who asserted that sex in Farrokhzad's life and poetry was used as "means of achieving some prominence in Persian literature" (Hillmann, 1986, p. 32). The literary critic Sirus Parham shares the same prevalent prejudice when he reduces Farrokhzad's ideal freedom to sexual freedom and claims that she sees sexual deprivation as her main deprivation (Hillmann, 1986, p. 84).

This critical exegesis aims to examine the tensions that Farrokhzad's provocative poetry, unique voice, and unconventional lifestyle evoked in Iranian society, by exploring the following question: What specific aspects of Forugh Farrokhzad's poetry agitated and challenged the core social and political tenets of Iranian society?

It will explore this question through close reading of her poems, and by placing provocative aspects of her poetry into the literary and cultural contexts of her time. In particular, this work will focus on the absence of the female body and individualised voice in both Persian literature and society to understand how Farrokhzad's

idiosyncratic voice challenged accepted social and political norms. The argument is based on exploring two main premises.

Firstly, I will study the confessional nature of Farrokhzad's poetry. While confession has been an inseparable part of Western culture, it is almost completely absent from the religious and cultural arenas of Iranian society. Farrokhzad's confessional style was truly provocative. Her emphasis on using a poetic "I" closely replicating her real-life "I" exacerbated the provocation. This point is elaborated by some scholars while discussing poems such as "Sin", "Face to Face with God", and "Harlot", where confession is a key concept. However, I will explore this point through close reading of her poem "I Feel Pity for the Garden", where the confessional elements of the poem are more subtle. Moreover, this poem provides an example of how the personal becomes political in her poetry.

Secondly, I will explore how Farrokhzad's poetry started an unprecedented poetic discourse on women's sexuality. Sexuality has been part of modern Persian literature and used to criticise traditional cultural, political, and religious institutions (Hillmann, 1986, p. 76). Moreover, passion and eroticism are two of the themes that have frequently appeared in the work of great classic Persian poets. For instance, in Rumi's poetry, moral messages are conveyed through erotic stories and "mystical knowledge is communicated in erotic terms" (Tourage, 2005, p. 600). However, sexuality in Farrokhzad's work is not meant to convey moral messages and neither is it open to mystic interpretation. Farrokhzad speaks of desire candidly, with no camouflage, and both her modern form and word choices make her poetry easily accessible to the contemporary reader. Due to this candid way of writing, Farrokhzad's critics, unable or unwilling to see her endeavour to attain personhood through her poetry as legitimate, have reduced her poetry to a mere search for sexual freedom.

Moreover, and most importantly, Farrokhzad's erotic poems were narrated from a female perspective in a land where poetry has always been a male business. *Treasure of speech*, one of the well-known anthologies of Persian poetry which was published in 1969 by Zabihollah Safa, listed one hundred and forty-three poets covering a period of more than one thousand years, and only two women were mentioned (Hillmann, 1986, p. 74). In Iranian society, where "anxieties about female sexuality have for centuries stood at the heart of legal and moral control of women's lives" (Darznik, 2010, p. 106), Farrokhzad was the first Iranian woman to turn feminine desire into a poetic discourse. In this exegesis, by looking at the way women's sexuality has been generally perceived in Iran by men, women, and even feminists, some light is shed on why this new discourse was represented mainly as nothing but a search for sexual freedom.

In my novel, *Only sound remains,* I further explore these notions through human interactions and the dominant discourses that ruled them at the time. The novel's main protagonist, Ismael, has internalised the rules and customs of a patriarchal society. This is partly highlighted in his infatuation with the idea of the rule of the jurisconsult, which is similar to Plato's idea of "the rule of the wisest" or the philosopher king. Ismael's feelings and attitudes towards Forugh portray how, both as a woman making unconventional life choices and as a female poet with a distinct, individualised voice, she was perceived and treated by her society at the time. For Ismael, who is confused by his own body, uncomfortable with what it demands of him, and unable to make peace between the worldly and the spiritual, ambivalence is at the core of his feelings towards Forugh. Having lived in a society where men and women are not only physically but also psychologically segregated, Ismael is not able to express his feelings in an honest and frank manner. Ismael's mentality, determined by patriarchal norms,

stops him from any attempt to have an open, equal, and transparent relationship with Forugh.

Further, Ismael's interactions with three other characters in the novel set the background against which the life and times of Forugh Farrokhzad can be perceived. Maleki, a political activist whose aspirations undermine patriarchal values, and whose final fate brings the Farrokhzad's verse into mind—"Swamps of alcohol / with their acrid toxic vapours / dragged into their depths / the stagnant mass of intellectuals"—even though Maleki stays active and hopeful until the end. Entezari, a religious scholar who founds the theoretical basis for the idea of the rule of the jurisconsult, but is forsaken and punished by the Ayatollah, by the Father, after criticising his judgment. Finally, Amir-Hossein, a bright philosophy student, who is among the minority who appreciates Farrokhzad's poetry but eventually leaves the country that makes him feel in exile at home: "People, / group of fallen people, / low-spirited and drained and stupefied / was going from one exile to another / under the ominous burden of their corpses."

Ambivalent sexism, psychological segregation, and paternalism are key concepts essential for understanding the arguments made in this study, and will be briefly discussed in this introduction.

1.3 Ambivalent sexism and psychological segregation

Iranian male attitudes towards women have never been homogeneous, but rather have fluctuated between hostility and benevolence, culminating in the sort of ambivalence that Glick and Fiske define as 'ambivalent sexism'. They argue that sexism can be regarded as a type of prejudice; however, instead of a uniform antipathy, it is driven by a deep ambivalence. While hostile sexism can be explained through prejudice, Glick

and Fiske (1996, p. 491) define benevolent sexism as a set of attitudes which view "women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviours typically categorised as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy seeking (e.g., self-disclosure)". Moreover, Glick and Fiske (1996, p. 492) claim that men's dependency on women for reproduction as well as their need for sexual and psychological intimacy have led to "protective attitudes toward women", "a reverence for the role of the women as wives and mother", and "idealisation of women as romantic love objects"—the defining attitudes of benevolent sexism.

Similarly, the inclination to limit women to being wives and mothers has been a dominant social ideology in Iran. The Islamic Revolution of 1978 accentuated this ideology by dismantling the Family Protection Law of 1967 and its 1975 amendments. These amendments aimed to give women the same legal rights as men with regard to access to divorce and custody of children. They were dismantled by the restoration of the sharia family law, which claimed to "protect the family" and realise women's "high status" in Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 635).

Moreover, in Iranian society, psychological segregation—in which "invisible walls separate men from women" even when it is necessary for the sexes to mingle (Milani, 1992, p. 27)—has intensified ambivalent male attitudes towards women. Reza Shah Pahlavi (the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty) outlawed veiling in 1936. However, as Milani has argued, this act of unveiling not only affected women but also made men, who were used to seeing veiled women, uncomfortable and confused. Milani describes this new sense of anxiety by citing a memory of Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad, who was among the first women at Tehran University, just two years after the unveiling law:

> For most of them, mixing with girls was something quite unforeseen. They therefore avoided talking to the girls or answering them, and if there was no escape, they blushed ear to ear and stuttered… Certain elderly professors were just as nervous as the boy students about speaking to the girls and looking them in the face. (Bamdad as cited in Milani, 2011, p. 24)

Around twenty years after this mandatory unveiling, Farrokhzad published one of her first poems, "Sin", which is an unprecedentedly candid expression of feminine desire. By this time most men, and especially secular and Western-educated men, had become more familiar with the unveiled bodies of women. However, the unveiling of the psyche proved more trenchant. After centuries of exercising their prerogatives in terms of expressing their sexuality, many men were not ready to see women crossing the lines of defined sexual propriety and claiming the same rights. Having played the role of the lover for several centuries, men were not ready to appear as the beloved.

Milani (2011, p. 24) asserts that a society which veils its women veils its men as well, as the veil defines the boundaries of the heterosexual relationship. With this same logic, one can say the unveiling of women also exposes men by revealing their previously well-hidden vulnerabilities.

The royal decree of unveiling managed to blur the lines of physical segregation to some extent. However, by looking at the relationships between men and women in general, and at the way Farrokhzad was judged by the most educated, secular and enlightened segments of Iranian society, one can see that it was ineffective at fundamentally changing the attitudes of men towards women; centuries of psychological segregation between men and women ultimately stayed intact.

Forugh Farrokhzad's life and poetry provide an index of how men's ambivalent feelings and attitudes are displayed towards women, and mark women's bodies and psyches.

1.4 Paternalism

The *Oxford dictionary of sociology* (2015) defines paternalism as:

> … social relationships within which the dominant partner adopts an attitude and set of practices that suggest provident fostering care for his or her subordinates … It also alludes to gross inequalities in access to, and exercise of, power.

This is in agreement with the view that considers sexism a form of ambivalence, as it incorporates both domination and protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 493). In Iranian society, paternalism not only affects men and women's personal relationships but also defines power relations more widely.

In *The Shah and the Ayatollah: Iranian mythology and the Islamic Revolution*, Freydoun Hoveyda (2003, p. 33) recalls how one of his French journalist friends, following a visit to Iran in 1981, asked "Are you Iranians insane? You stunned the whole world by overthrowing with your bare hands the powerful dictatorship of the Shah. And now your compatriots voluntarily, if not enthusiastically, submit to another dictator, even more totalitarian and repressive than the Shah and his regime!"

Hoveyda tries to explain the situation of the Shah and the Ayatollah, which has bewildered many Westerners, through what he calls the Rostam Syndrome. Rostam is a mythological hero and one of the main players in the highly popular Iranian epic

called *Shahnameh*, or *The book of kings*. Rostam spends one night with Tahmineh, daughter of the king of Samangan, a neighbouring country of Iran. Nine months later, Tahmineh gives birth to a son whom she names Sohrab, who grows up to become an epic warrior in the army of Touran, enemy of Iran. The father and the son face each other on the battlefield, incognisant of each other's real identities. During the first battle, the naive Sohrab dominates Rostam, but Rostam tricks his way out of the predicament by saying that real valour demands that one must dominate one's opponent three times before one has the right to shed his blood. However, in the second encounter, Rostam fatally wounds Sohrab at the first chance he gets. After Rostam learns the real identity of his dying opponent, Sohrab consoles his father with the following words: "You must not weep … What happened is what had to happen" (Hoveyda, 2003, p. 43).

Defining the leader in Iran as a two-faced father, compassionate on the one hand and stern on the other, and by following these father-son relationships through different levels and segments of the society, Hoveyda claims, "we find at each social level a 'father' who becomes a 'son' in relation to the upper levels" (2003, p. 45). Hoveyda explains the phenomenon of Islamic Revolution not in terms of people seeking democracy and freedom, as a Western observer may assume, but as an endeavour to replace the weak patriarch (the Shah) with the strong one (the Ayatollah). One of the conditions that Ayatollah Khomeini had for his return to Iran was that the Shah would leave the country first: for as long as the monarch (father) was still in the country, the only position left for him was that of the son. A couple of decades earlier, the prime minister of the time, Reza Khan, similarly convinced Ahmad Shah Qajar to leave the country before he announced himself as Reza Shah, supposedly for that same reason. Hoveyda (2003, p. 44) argues that:

> … in Iranian tradition, paternalism is not only authoritarian and absolute, it is also despotic. This type of father-son relationship pervades Iranian society at all levels. The Rostam Syndrome exerts its deep influence from the top to the bottom of the social pyramid.

Moreover, the father, both as a concept and as a person, is highly revered in desert religions. For instance, the law of retaliation (*Qisas*) is at the core of Islamic jurisprudence and is used to pass verdicts for murder, injury, and aggravated assaults. Based on the *Qisas* principal, a murder is punishable by the death penalty. However, the exception to this is the father, who will not be punished in retaliation for murdering his children. As punishment, the father has to pay blood money to his children's heirs and spend three to ten years in prison. This special treatment represents the unique place held for the father in Islamic culture. In Islam the father is given the right to maintain his authority even through violence, if necessary.

Pre-Islamic patriarchy in Iranian society was re-enforced after the Arab invasion and through Islam as a father-religion. I argue that in Islamic law a woman occupies a position between a child and an adult according to Islamic jurisprudence. Women are not treated as children per se, since unlike children they are expected to observe their religious duties and practice Islamic rituals such as daily prayers, fasting, and hijab. In addition, they can own property and engage in business with full autonomy. However, there are practices that demonstrate that women are not considered *full* adults, and that their husbands play the role of guardian. For instance, according to sharia a woman inherits half as much as a man. This point is usually justified by the different scale of responsibility for the two sexes. A woman gets the inheritance for herself (and she has complete control over it), while the man is responsible for all the women and under-

age children around him, such as younger brothers or a widowed sister (Omar, 2012, p. 5). Putting aside the adequacy of this justification, it demonstrates that in Islam men are regarded as the guardians of women. Another example is a man having permission to beat his wife in cases of ill-conduct and rebelliousness, even though this "should leave no mark, should not be on face or to any sensitive area" (Omar, 2012, p. 17). The Quranic verse mentioning this permission says:

> As to those women on whose part you see nushuz (ill-conduct), admonish them (first), (next) refuse to share their beds, (and last) beat them lightly, but if they return to obedience, do not seek against them means of annoyance; verily Allah is the sublime great. (Omar, 2012, p. 16)

Answering the question of whether domestic violence is permitted in Islam or not, Shagufta Omar, lecturer at the International Islamic University Islamabad and a member of the International Muslim Women's Union, claims that punishment is only permitted in extreme cases, and in basically non-violent ways: "just like a teacher might do to [a] student, or a father does to his children" (2012, p. 17). This line of reasoning further demonstrates that in Islam men are considered to be women's guardians.

It is important to note that this argument does not try to reduce the complicated issue of power relations between men and women to a simple bipolar of cruel oppressing men and hapless oppressed women. As Foucault asserts while discussing the relations of power, nobody owns power; it circulates among different individuals, groups, and institutions (Adams & Dyson, 2004, p. 219). Even in Islam there are rules and regulations that have been used by women to influence the power relations between men and women. For instance, *Mahr* is a mandatory payment that must be paid by the

groom to the bride upon her request, and she is legally entitled to it. Hence, men can end up in prison for not being able to pay *Mahr* demanded by their wives. Moreover, since marriage is treated as a contract, women can negotiate and ask for rights which are traditionally men's to be included in their marriage certificates. One example is the right to divorce, which women can practice under very limited circumstances, such as cruelty, insanity, incompetence, and abandonment (Cherry, 2001, p. 323). This shows that even in despotic patriarchy, power is fluid; it does not *belong* to a person or a group only, and depends on negotiations. Nonetheless, it can be concluded from the evidence presented here that in Iranian patriarchy, men in general have more means to determine how the forces of power function and they function in the main in the interests of men.

In contrast to the Greek Oedipus myth, in the Iranian myth of Rostam and Sohrab, the mighty father kills the son. The old wins over the new and patriarchy reinforces itself through violence. The strong roots of despotic paternalism in Iranian culture, as well as the fact that Islamic tradition and Quranic verses provide numerous examples of men being considered women's guardians, feed into and sustain sexism in Iran.

1.5 Outline

The exegesis is outlined as follows. The second chapter explores Farrokhzad's new poetic discourse on women's sexuality in a society where female sexuality "is embeded within a 'strong culture of silence'." (Merghati, 2005, p. 135). In the first part of the chapter, "Forugh Farrokhzad: Of "Sin" and her demons", I explore why "Sin"—the publication of which marked the birth of an unprecedented poetic discourse on women's sexuality in Persian literature—has been one of Farrokhzad's most important poems, despite its inelegant style. Further, through close reading of two poems—"Only Sound Remains" and "Green Delusion"—I argue that ambivalence and fluctuations

between self-doubt and self-confidence are central to her life and poetry. In the second section, “Forugh Farrokhzad and unconventional love”, I argue that ambivalence stayed central to Farrokhzad’s life and poetry until her death because she fashioned her sexuality against the ethos of her time, and approached love in an unconventional manner. Even while disillusioned with love, she still pursued it.

The third chapter explores confession in the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad through close reading of her poem “I Feel Pity for the Garden”. In this chapter I focus on how the personal becomes political in her poetry in a culture in which “a veil seemed to cover private selves and forbid self-revelation and self-referentiality” (Milani, 2002, p. 623).

I conclude my exegesis by exploring the connections between my novel and the arguments made in the exegesis. First, citing from my novel, I explore how Iranian society—in which ethics is traditionally based on the denial of, and contempt for, the body—tried to punish and regulate Farrokhzad, who fashioned her sexuality against the ethos of her time. Second, referring to my novel, I further explore the dominant attitudes towards confession, and how it is regarded as either a sign of naivety or promotion of a sinful act.

2. Forugh Farrokhzad and an unprecedented poetic discourse on women's sexuality

2.1 Introduction

Western subjects have been preoccupied with sex and sexuality for the last three hundred years, and as Foucault (1976, p. 69) writes:

> We demand that sex speak the truth … and we demand that it tells us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness.

The history of sexuality: The use of pleasure investigates the ethics of pleasure in both Greek antiquity and Christianity. While pleasure followed a "strong codification" in Christianity (Foucault, 1984, p. 30) which was defined around concepts such as virginity and chastity, Greeks did not have a pre-defined code for their ethics of pleasure, which revolved around moderation as the key concept (Foucault, 1984, p. 37).

There is no such extensive study on the ethics of pleasure in Islam. Nonetheless, Islam, like other desert religions, has a strict code of conduct for pleasure. In Islam, unlike Christianity, virginity and chastity are not considered virtues in themselves. For instance, early marriage is encouraged and is even *waajib*—which in Islamic law refers to a compulsory act—when there is a risk of adultery or other sins (Sumption, 2016, p. 10). Many hadiths (sayings of Prophet Muhammad or infallible imams) encourage marriage. For instance, Prophet Muhammad says: "Young men, those of you who can

support a wife should marry, for it keeps you from looking at non permissible females and protects you from immorality" (Bukhari as cited in Sumption, 2016, p. 11).

There is no study on the ethics of pleasure in Iranian culture, which is a complex combination of Iran's Islamic and pre-Islamic heritage, either. *Nowruz*, a celebration of Iranian New Year at the beginning of the spring, *Shab-e-Yalda*, a festival that celebrates the longest night of the year, and *Chacharshanbeh Suri*, a festival of fire on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year, are all pre-Islamic customs and festivals and still are an important part of Iranian culture. As Touraj Daryaee, a contemporary historian at the University of California, writes, "the basis of Iranian psyche and world-view was and is shaped by Zoroastrianism" (2009, p. xix). The vivid presence of pre-Islamic elements in Iranian culture and worldview adds to the complexity of any study aiming to investigate the ethics of pleasure in Iran, since in this case—and unlike in many other Muslim countries—understanding the ethics of pleasure in Islam will not suffice.

However, in the absence of any extensive discourse on sexuality, it is safe to say that in Iran, sexuality has been treated with silence and whispers. These whispers have been even more difficult to hear when it comes to women's sexuality. Effat Merghati (2006, p. 135) in her Ph.D. thesis *Language of love in culture of silence: Sexual understanding of Iranian women and socio-cultural determinants*, writes that in Iran "women and girls are basically instructed to practice *sokoot* (silence) as their basic mode in sexual interactions". Therefore, any sexual discourse is embedded within the "culture of silence" through which Iranian women's sexuality has been fashioned.

Farrokhzad was one of the first Iranian woman who challenged this "culture of silence" and turned feminine desire into a poetic discourse. In the second edition of *The captive*, she writes:

> Only through the strength of perseverance shall I be able to do my own part in freeing the hands and feet of art from the chains of rotten conditions and in bringing into existence the right of everyone … and especially women to be able freely to draw aside the curtain of their hidden instincts and tender, fleeting emotions and to be able to describe what is in their hearts without fear and concern for the criticism of others. (Farrokhzad as cited in Hillmann, 1986, p. 28)

Not just in her early poetry, but also in her later poems in *Another birth* and those published posthumously in *Let us believe in the beginning of the cold season*, sexuality remains a central concern (Hillmann, 1986, p. 78); this new poetic discourse on women's sexuality is explored in this chapter.

2.2 Forugh Farrokhzad: of "Sin" and her demons

Literary texts are mostly valued for what they achieve through language (Greenham, 2018, p. 144). In this section, however, I argue that "Sin" and the extreme reaction it has evoked among its readers can be understood through its adversarial context. By highlighting how the female agency and voice represented in this poem differ from other poems that precede it, I reframe the poem "from a position *outside* the text" (Greenham, 2018, p. 144), to explore why this short poem has survived for decades, and can be considered as one of Farrokhzad's most important poems despite its poetic shortcomings.

2.2.1 Of “Sin”…

“Sin” was not Farrokhzad’s first poem to appear in a literary journal, but it was the one which brought her instant fame and notoriety. The story of its publication as narrated by Farzaneh Milani in her biography of Forugh Farrokhzad is quite informative.

Milani (2016, p. 81) recounts how Forugh entered the *Roshanfekr* journal’s office and asked to meet the chief editor of the literary section. The editor invited the young woman with unkempt hair and ink-stained hand to take a seat. After having a cup of tea, Forugh—with a flushed face and shaky fingers—passed three of her poems to the editor. Fereydoon Moshiri, the chief editor of the journal and a prominent contemporary Persian poet, skimmed through the poems and was shocked by their blunt content. An Iranian woman talking about love—especially one that sounded illegitimate—in such a frank and candid manner was unprecedented. Moshiri was worried about the reactions of readers and felt obligated to consult his colleagues before making any decision. “Sin” was published after other editors recommended its publication. It created an instant uproar.

I sinned, a gratifying sin	گناه کردم گناهی پر ز لذت
in an embrace, warm and ardent	در آغوشی که گرم و آتشین بود
I sinned embraced by arms	گناه کردم میان بازوانی
hot and vindictive and iron.	که داغ و کینه جو و آهنین بود
In that dark and silent seclusion,	در آن خلوتگه تاریک و خاموش
I looked into his mysterious eyes	نگه کردم به چشم پر ز رازش
my heart trembled impatiently in my chest	دلم درسینه بی تابانه لرزید
by the desire in his yearning eyes.	ز خواهش های چشم پرنیازش

In that dark and silent seclusion,	در آن خلوتگه تاریک و خاموش
I sat anxiously at his side,	پریشان در کنار او نشستم
his lips poured desire on my lips,	لبش بر روی لبهایم هوس ریخت
I escaped the sorrow of the crazed heart.	ز اندوه دل دیوانه رستم
I read into his ear the tale of love:	فرو خواندم به گوشش قصهٔ عشق :
I want you, O, my dearest,	ترا می خواهم ای جانانهٔ من
I want you, O, life-giving embrace,	ترا می خواهم ای آغوش جانبخش
O, you, my frenzied lover.	ترا، ای عاشق دیوانهٔ من
Desire sparked a flame in his eyes	هوس در دیدگانش شعله افروخت
the red wine danced in the glass	شراب سرخ در پیمانه رقصید
in the soft bed, my body	تن من در میان بستر نرم
shivered drunkenly on his chest.	به روی سینه اش مستانه لرزید
I sinned, a gratifying sin	گنه کردم گناهی پر ز لذت
beside a trembling, stupefied body	کنار پیکری لرزان و مدهوش
O God, how do I know what I did	خداوندا چه می دانم چه کردم
in that dark and quiet seclusion (Farrokhzad, 1968b, p. 11-15).	در آن خوتگه تاریک و خاموش

In many critics' views, "Sin" is one of Farrokhzad's weakest poems. For instance, Homa Katouzian, a member of the Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Oxford, claims that the poem has less artistic value than later or even earlier poems, as "It is a simple poem … involving some repetition and employing commonplace or unlikely figures of speech and literary devices" (2010, pp. 7–8). Katouzian (2010, p. 8) claims

that the poem's weakness can be best appreciated in the Persian original, since in the English translation the weaknesses of form and substance can be camouflaged.

While I agree with Katouzian on the weakness of the poem, I will argue that the translated form can be more informative than the original. The poem is comprised of connected doublets, and like all versification in Persian, is heavily dependent on metre and rhyme. Translation of a versified poem provides the opportunity to evaluate the originality of the poetic thinking, and assess whether the piece on hand can achieve anything beyond mere versification.

The imagery in "Sin"—desire sparking a flame in the lover's eyes, or the dance of red wine in the glass—is at best mediocre. Similar images and metaphors are widespread in Persian poetry. While a poem is irreducible to its conceptual content, when written in prose, this poem's conceptual content is readily summarised in one or two short sentences describing a forbidden sexual relationship. As highlighted by Katouzian (2010, p. 8), the poem's word choice is poor—for example, in the description of something fiery as warm and later as hot. Moreover, the tone of the poem is close to adolescent poetry at times. Phrases such as "mysterious eyes" and "yearning eyes" are redolent of Persian popular songs.

"Sin" seems to lack enough ardour and emotional depth to transcend time as a work of art. It does not have the timeless quality of the apocalyptic tone of her later work "Earthly Verses", or the powerful imagery of "a sad little fairy / who dies with a kiss at night / and will be born again with a kiss at dawn," in "Another Birth".

Bearing this in mind, why has this short poem survived for decades and been one of Farrokhzad's most discussed poems? What was responsible for the extreme reaction this poem evoked among its readers?

This poem, with its not-so-elegant style, is a frank expression of the carnal desire of two bodies coming together with no grand purpose but meeting their sexual needs in a society in which ethics are traditionally based on denial of, and contempt for, the body. This approach to the body is so integral to Iranian culture that even one of Farrokhzad's early poems, "Face to Face with God", written shortly after "Sin", expresses an obvious disdain for the body. The poem starts with the speaker admitting that she carries a source of sin and depravity in her chest. After a few stanzas, she writes of being weary and tired of her body and asks God for another body—perhaps one that is pure and not polluted by her sins. The poem speaks of a love that can turn her into an angel of God's paradise. Moreover, she wants to see in her lover the pure nature of God himself. The poem ends with the speaker wishing that God would show her his face and cleanse her from her zest for sin and the seeking of bodily pleasure.

"Sin" leaves no room for spiritual interpretation; nor does it draw any moral conclusions for the reader, as in some of the most well-known classical poetry in Persian literature. One famous example of this is the poem "The Importance of Gourd-Crafting", by Rumi (Coleman, 2005, pp. 181–182). This poem tells the story of a woman's bestiality using the most vulgar language, without censorship or camouflage. A mistress finds out that her maidservant "had trained a donkey to perform the service of a man". What she does not know is that the maidservant has used a gourd to carve a flanged device to "keep him from going too far into her". She sends the maidservant out on an errand. The poem ends with the mistress dying as the donkey "pushed through and into her intestines". Rumi provides the readers with moral advice throughout the story: "When you begin to work without full knowledge you risk your life"; "Don't sacrifice your life to your animal-soul!" He finally concludes, "She is an image of immoderation". One can speculate that if Forugh's poem had ended with the speaker

repenting, or paying the price of her immoral act one way or another, or at least maintaining an apologetic tone, it would have not given rise to the same commotion. Moreover, the words of the poem are commonplace, those used in day-to-day conversations, making it accessible to every literate person and therefore more of a menace to what was considered to be "public morality".

The protagonist of the poem is a woman. This is important, since there are few established female voices prior to Farrokhzad in Persian poetry, none of their voices are personal, and all are vigorously veiled. One example is Parvin Etesami, who is considered one of the most talented Iranian poets of the twentieth century. Her career as a poet [1921–1941] coincides with the compulsory unveiling in Iran in 1936. Farzaneh Milani (1992, p. 102) claims that the discomfort many Iranian women experienced at having their bodies exposed manifested in the tensions that exist in the works of Etesami. Milani observes a parallel "between the woman who tries to conceal her newly exposed body from men's gaze and the pioneering poet who needs to hide her authorial identity from what she perceives as prying eyes and ears" (1992, p. 102).

Etesami expresses her support for women's emancipation in her poems (Milani, 1992, p. 110) through impersonal language. Milani (1992, pp. 114–117) discusses one of Etesami's poems entitled "God's Weaver". In this poem, the spider that "toiled ambitiously as with a spindle, / its mind bent solely on its work" is a symbol for the female artist whose art's value is questioned by an arrogant observer and judged as a superficial task.

The lazy fellow said: "What a superficial job!
Heaven is in no need of such operations.
There are mountains to climb in this world's workshop.

Who'll ever exalt you, you wisp of straw?"

To which the spider responds by saying that weaving is her calling and there is another "market" where her work is appreciated.

There exists another market, my dear Sir,
Where my fabric is well appreciated…
This is my calling, important or not.
I am the apprentice, time is the master.

In "God's Weaver", the artist's personal message is expressed through an impersonal voice and through symbols. In "Sin", however, the use of "I" prompts the reader to assimilate the speaker and the poet, assuming that this is not just a woman narrating her fantasy, but a woman recalling a real incident—a real sin.

The poem transgresses the norms that determine accepted language for a respectable woman. The candid expression of bodily desire is deemed to be offensive in Iranian culture, where a restricted language of sexuality is used and it is common to employ euphemisms or body language to convey certain meanings; even in medical contexts "a basic colloquial vocabulary" or "demonstrative pronouns with contextually implied meaning" are used for communication between patients and health workers (Merghati-Khoei, 2006, p. 139).

The female agency represented in this poem defies all the clichés of gender roles found in classical Persian literature. In "Sin", Farrokhzad has turned the traditional role of man/lover/subject and woman/beloved/object on its head. It is the female protagonist of the poem who—leaving her "proper place"—is committing a sin, reading the tale of love into her lover's ear, and asking for her lover's life-giving embrace. As Milani

(1992, p. 141) asserts, man, who has assumed the position of lover for centuries, becomes the beloved in her poetry.

The voice of a woman who claims prerogatives traditionally reserved for a man becomes the dominant voice in Farrokhzad's poetry in general, and in "Sin" in particular. As highlighted by Marta Simidchieva (2010, p. 29), Professor of Persian Literature at York University, Farrokhzad demands women's freedom to be both the object and the subject in their own poetry. Farrokhzad alludes to seemingly contradictory metaphors of the nightingale (reserved for the lover/subject) and the rose (reserved for the beloved/object) in her poem "Rebellion". She wants to be free like a songbird to "rise on the wings of inspiration" and become a rose in the garden of poetry.

The protagonist of the poem calls the whole experience a sin; however, there is no real sign of regret and no word to indicate repentance. Nor is there a possibility for the reader to conclude that the protagonist is confessing in order to set an example, to ask for forgiveness, or to condemn the action. In "Of the sins of Forugh Farrokhzad", Katouzian (2010, p. 8) writes that the poem ends with Forugh remorsefully addressing God. I suggest that the last stanza, "O God, how do I know what I did / in that dark and quiet seclusion", reads more like a rhetorical question and does not convey any sign of real remorse. Rather, the confession reads as the recalling of a cherished memory. It conveys the positive sense of a chance to escape the sorrow of her crazed heart, and to read the tale of love into her lover's ear while asking for his life-giving embrace. A confession? Yes, but not a remorseful one. It seems that even though the protagonist confesses to her sinful act, her sense of guilt is insufficient to lead to denunciation. Regarding the whole experience as a "Sin" shows that the protagonist of the poem—despite disregarding the values of her society—has internalised them in a subtle way.

Here she calls herself a “sinner”, and in other poems she condemns herself as a “worthless mother” and even a “harlot” based on the same value system.

Most importantly, and despite all its artistic shortcomings, “Sin” will always be one of Farrokhzad’s most important poems because its publication in 1955 marked the birth of an unprecedented poetic discourse on women’s sexuality in Persian literature, and introduced one of the main themes in Farrokhzad’s poetry throughout her relatively brief artistic career. The woman in this poem is not a mere object of desire, but has her own agency and acts according to her free will. In this poem, the woman’s body enters Persian poetry not as *something* that only responds to male needs (and is inanimate in its absence), but as *someone* that wants, desires, and demands autonomously.

Looking at the way women’s sexuality has been generally perceived in Iran by both men and women can shed light on why this new discourse was unwelcome, misrepresented, and misunderstood. In this regard, an article by Shahla Haeri, the director of the Women's Studies Program at Boston University which explores temporary marriage as an Islamic discourse on women’s sexuality, is informative.

The President of Iran, Hashemi Rafsanjani, shocked his audience in his Friday sermon of November 1990 with a speech on temporary marriage, an Islamic practice in which a man and woman marry for a definite and limited time. Haeri (1992, p. 201) argues that this might have been the first time in the history of Islam that a political/religious leader openly and unambiguously acknowledged female sexuality. Rafsanjani started his talk by saying that sexual deprivation is wrong and anti-Islamic. Further, he elaborated this point as he said:

> If we had a healthy society, then the situation of all these widows would be very different. Then when they felt the need, *niaz*, they could approach one of their

> friends or relatives from a position of confidence and invite him to marry them temporarily. This they could do without fear of being shamed or ostracized by others. (Haeri, 1992, p. 202)

Among all the uproar that Mr. Rafsanjani's speech provoked in Iranian society, the reaction of the feminist magazine *Zan-i Ruz* (*Today's Woman*) is most informative regarding common attitudes towards women's sexuality. In its editorial, the president's argument was criticised in the following way:

> One cannot of course deny human drives. But if men and women agree to get together for one, two, or three months, then what is the difference between this and male-female relationships in the West? Besides, what kinds of human beings will they turn out to be, those men and women who keep making contracts of temporary marriage? (Haeri 1992, p. 205)

From a critical perspective, trying to refute a point because it suggests a practice that has a similar Western counterpart is a fallacy. More importantly, the sentence "what kinds of human beings will they turn out to be, those men and women who keep making contracts of temporary marriage?" points to the common belief that the inherent impurity of sex can only be removed by marriage or through its romanticising in love.

This discussion is indicative of the dominant understanding of sex and sexuality among intellectuals and even feminists in Iran. The author fails to see, or purposefully ignores, that the idea of temporary marriage contradicts the accepted norm that women must neither have sex out of the institution of permanent marriage nor show any sign of autonomous sexuality. Here, the argument made by a feminist magazine contrasts

with Farrokhzad's radical thinking, expressed almost forty years earlier in the introduction to the second printing of her first book, *The captive*, where she writes:

> … and especially women to be able freely to draw aside the curtain for their hidden instincts and tender, fleeting emotions and to be able to describe what is in their hearts without fear for the criticism of others … when I leaf through magazines … I see that men everywhere have described their love and beloved with utter frankness and freedom … and people have read these books with complete equanimity, no one screaming out in protest that: O lord … the foundations of morality have been shaken. (Farrokhzad as cited in Hillmann, 1986, pp. 28–29)

This difference between commonly held views on women's sexuality and propriety and Farrokhzad's radical poetics suggests why Farrokhzad, the creator of the most illuminating verse on sexuality in Persian literature (Hillmann, 1986, p. 77), felt like "a lonely woman".

2.2.2 …and her demons

There is no obvious trace of remorse in "Sin"; however, a sense of guilt, bewilderment, regret, and confusion are rampant throughout Farrokhzad's *oeuvre*. Two poems published in her first book, *The captive*, best illustrate this point. In the first poem, "Rebellion", the narrator demands to be set free from a domestic life that feels like living in a cage, to tell her own story and to cure her melancholic heart:

Come on, O man, the selfish creature	بیا ای مرد، ای موجود خودخواه
come and open the door of the cage	بیا بگشای درهای قفس را
if you have imprisoned me for a lifetime	اگر عمری به زندانم کشیدی
set me free at least for one breath...	رها کن دیگرم این یک نفس را
Don’t lock my lips with silence	به لبهایم مزن قفل خموشی
as I have an untold story in my heart	که در دل قصه ای ناگفته دارم
unfasten this callous tie from my feet	ز پایم باز کن بند گران را
since my heart is vexatious with melancholy	کزین سودا دلی آشفته دارم

(Farrokhzad, 1976, p. 74).

In this poem, written during her marriage and while she lived with her husband in Ahvaz, she talks not only to men in general but also to her husband in particular, since her husband had stopped being supportive of her poetry after the publication of “Sin” and the shame it had caused him. It is her husband who is her “prison guard” and calls her poetry sinful; he is the one who should open the door of the cage for her to fulfil her calling and become an artist:

Come and open the door so I’ll fly	بیا بگشای در تا پرگشایم
to the bright sky of poetry	بسوی آسمان روشن شعر
if you let me fly	اگر بگذاریم پرواز کردن
I’ll become a flower in the garden of poetry	گلی خواهم شدن درگلشن شعر

(Farrokhzad, 1976, p. 74).

In this poem, the speaker talks of her wish to become “a flower in the garden of poetry” and asks for her freedom. In “Return”—written almost six months later—she

demands the exact opposite. She asks her lover (whom the context reveals to be her husband, the same prison guard in “Rebellion”) not to be hurt by her poetry. This highly self-referential poem talks of poetry bringing the poet nothing but her lover’s resentment, and finishes with following stanzas, expressing a wish to return to the cage:

I called it a cage, but last time	گفتم قفس، ولی چه بگویم که پیش از این
I was not aware of people’s hypocrisy	آگاهی از دوروئی مردم مرا نبود
alas that the deceptive charming world	دردا که این جهان فریبای نقشباز
had seduced me with its lustre and glamour	با جلوه و جلال خود آخر مرا ربود
Now, this is I, who weary of lie and deceit	اکنون منم که خسته ز دام فریب و مک
have returned towards the cage	بار دگر به کنج قفس رو نموده ام
open its door that during my whole life	بگشای در که در همه دوران عمر خویش
I have never been happy but behind its bars	جز پشت میله های قفس خوش نبوده ام
Fasten my feet in chains again	پای مرا دوباره به زنجیرها ببند
so lie and deceit not sway me	تا فتنه و فریب ز جایم نیفکند
so the iron hand of miscellaneous desires	تا دست آهنین هوسهای رنگ رنگ
not trap me again (Farrokhzad, 1973, p. 112-113).	بندی دگر دوباره به پایم نیفکند

In “Return”, she feels nostalgic for the life she described as living in a cage in “Rebellion” and asks her husband to fasten her feet in chains. The comparison between these two poems provides just one example of the uncertainty, self-doubt, and ambivalence throughout her poetry.

Katouzian (2010, p. 10) writes that "It is in the later poems, and especially those of the period of her 'rebirth', that 'pleasure' gives way to acceptance, and 'sin', to real self-assertion and self-confidence". This "acquired sense of freedom, independence and responsibility … closes the seasons of 'pleasurable sins', 'errors', and 'mistakes' combined with guilt, regret and self-reproach" (Katouzian 2010, p. 12). Citing "I am not remorseful. I am thinking of this submission, this painful submission" from her poem "In the cold street of night", Katouzian (2010, p. 16) continues: "This time there is no defiant confession of sin, nor is there any self-doubt, nor any regrets of what has happened."

This somewhat utopian claim assumes that a woman has—almost singlehandedly—fully transcended millennia of patriarchal culture, its ethos, burdens, and moral prohibitions, despite her short life span of thirty-two years and her even shorter life span of twelve years as a published poet. Through close reading of two of her poems —"Only Sound Remains" and "Green Delusion"—I will argue that ambivalence and fluctuations between self-doubt and self-confidence are central to her life and poetry, not only in her early work, but even in the poems of the period of her "rebirth". Varying in degree, and weakening as she evolves and matures both as a person and as a poet, nonetheless they are always present in her life and its mirror, her poetry.

George Mead, American sociologist and the founding father of symbolic interactionism, famously defined the self as a social product (Elliott, 2013, p. 27). In his conceptualisation of self, there is a central distinction between the "I" and the "me". The socialised self, "me", is built by internalising other people's attitudes during one's early life. The "I", on the other hand, is a mixture of desires and dispositions. The self is distinguished from others through the spontaneous wishes of the "I", which is responsible for creativity and innovation. The close reading of "Only Sound Remains",

will reveal that this poem can be read as a conflict between the creative “I” and the “me”, the poet and the establishment.

The first point that stands out while reading “Only Sound Remains” is the iteration of the phrase “Why should I stop?”, repeated five times throughout the poem. In Farsi, the semantic meaning of the word توقف , translated here as stop, can cover a range of meanings such as “stopping from movement”, “stopping to think”, “pause” and “discontinuation”. Further, the lines that precede or succeed this question convey that the question should be read as a rhetorical one. Therefore, one of the themes of the poem reveals itself to be continuation, movement and persistence. This is mainly expressed through a collection of binaries. For instance, the speaker establishes a binary between movement and stagnancy. The poem starts with the “search of the blue direction” by birds.

Why should I stop, why?	چرا توقف کنم، چرا؟
The birds have gone in search of the blue direction,	پرنده ها به جستجوی جانب آبی رفته اند
the horizon is vertical,	افق عمودی است
the horizon is vertical and movement: fountain-like	افق عمودی است و حرکت: فواره وار
And at the extents of vision	و در حدود بینش
the bright plants are spinning	سیاره های نورانی می چرخند
It is in elevation that the earth reaches repetition	زمین در ارتفاع به تکرار می رسد
and aerial wells	و چاههای هوایی
are turning into tunnels of intimacy	به نقبهای رابطه تبدیل می شوند

And day is a vastness	و روز وسعتی است
that does not fit into the limited imagination of a newspaper worm (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 76-77).	که در مخیله تنگ کرم روزنامه نمی گنجد

In Farsi, the word, پرنده, translated here as "bird", can also be used to refer to anyone or anything with the ability to fly, and freedom is its connotation. The word used in Farsi for blue, آبی, literally means something that has the color of water, and therefore blue has the positive connotation of life and growth. This creates the image of one moving freely in search of life. The following stanzas—referring to the vertical horizon and fountain-like movements—reemphasise this imagery through the image of a free bird that can fly fountain-like and against gravity, or in a way in which the horizon becomes vertical. The word bird enters the poem again later when the speaker says that she has taken the advice of a bird "which had died" and advised her "to commit flight to memory".

I'm a descendent of the trees	من از سلاله ی درختانم
breathing the stale air depresses me	تنفس هوای مانده ملولم می کند
a bird which had died advised me to commit flight to memory (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 79).	پرنده ای که مرده بود به من پند داد که پرواز را بخاطر بسپارم

Since the dead cannot advise, it is the observation of death which has reminded the poet that what matters and what should be committed to memory is the flight: "the search of the blue direction". The poet dies; it is only the poem, "[…] sound that remains". On the other hand, the poet finds it only natural that a windmill rots, as its

movement does not go beyond the endless circular movement of its vanes. This repetition signifies a lack of ambition.

The ultimate object of all forces is to be united,	نهایت تمام نیروها پیوستن است،
to be united with the origin of the bright light	پیوستن به اصل روشن نور
and to be poured into the light's intelligence.	و ریختن به شعور نور
It is natural that windmills rot (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 79).	طبیعی است که آسیابهای بادی می پوسند

The life of an artist who keeps doing what has been done for centuries—for instance, following the classic forms in Persian poetry—is like the repetitive movement of a windmill's vanes. However, the one who breaks free from the old forms in her art and goes beyond the established norms in her life is like a bird that can experience life differently. It can move fountain-like or in such a way that the horizon becomes vertical.

Another binary that exists throughout the poem is that between death and corruption on the one hand and life and growth on the other. The concepts of death and corruption appear first when the speaker talks about the death of "corrupt cells" in the "womb of the moon".

Why should I stop?	چرا توقف کنم؟
The path passes through the capillaries of life.	راه از میان مویرگهای حیات می گذرد
The quality of the cultivating environment of the womb of the moon	کیفیت محیط کشتی زهدان ماه
will kill the corrupt cells.	سلولهای فاسد را خواهد کشت.

And in the chemical atmosphere after sunrise,	و در فضای شیمیائی بعد از طلوع
it is only sound,	تنها صداست
sound that will be absorbed by the particles of time.	صدا که جذب ذره های زمان خواهد شد
Why should I stop?	چرا توقف کنم؟
What can a swamp be?	چه میتواند باشد مرداب
What can it be, but a place for corrupted insects to spawn.	چه میتواند باشد جز جای تخم ریزی حشرات فاسد
The swollen corpses give birth to morgue's thoughts.	افکار سردخانه را جنازه های باد کرده رقم میزنند.
The unmanly one,	نامرد، در سیاهی
has hidden his lack of manliness in darkness,	فقدان مردی اش را پنهان کرده است
and the cockroach…ah	و سوسک... آه
when the cockroach talks.	وقتی که سوسک سخن می گوید.
why should I stop?	چرا توقف کنم؟
Collaboration of lead letters is in vain.	همکاری حروف سربی بیهوده ست.
Collaboration of lead letters	همکاری حروف سربی
will not save the lowly thought (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 77-78)	اندیشهٔ حقیر را نجات نخواهد داد.

Moon in Farsi, ماه, is used to describe beauty, and the womb is the place where life grows. The poet refers to the "womb of the moon" as a "cultivating environment". I suggest that "corrupt cells" here refers to an unworthy art that cannot survive the test of time. This point can be put into perspective when one pays attention to another theme of the poem: immortality through art. It is expressed by the speaker through the stanza

“And in the chemical atmosphere after sunrise, it is only sound, sound that will be absorbed by the particles of time”. Sunrise in Iranian literature has been used figuratively to show the victory of good over evil and truth over falsehood. “After sunrise” is the moment when sound “will be absorbed by the particles of time”, and since time is timeless, this absorption and unification with time guarantees the sound’s immortality.

The concept of corruption reappears a few lines later, when the poet describes a swamp. The word, مرداب, here translated as swamp, literally means “dead water” in Farsi. It is dead because of its stagnancy. A few lines later, the speaker talks about “the sound of water’s lucid desire to flow”. The water’s natural tendency is to flow, and if it is not met, what is left behind is “dead water”, a swamp. The word swamp is a crux; the binaries of stagnancy and movement (swamp versus sea), death and corruption against life and growth (swamp versus trees), and light against darkness (swamp versus sun) condense in the word swamp. Here, swamp symbolises a dead, stagnant society that can only give birth to corrupt people in general, and corrupt intellectuals in particular. The concept of growth enters the poem through the simile of the speaker as a tree in the stanza that reads “I’m a descendent of the trees”. This image gains intensity in the following lines in which the poet speaks of how the stale air depresses her, in opposition to corrupt insects that thrive in the rotten atmosphere of a swamp. The concept of growth continues to develop through the image of the poet breastfeeding the “unripe bunches of wheat”. In Iranian culture, wheat means bread, and bread means life.

Why should I stop?	چرا توقف کنم؟

I hold the unripe bunches of wheat	من خوشه های نارس گندم را
under my breasts	به زیر پستان می گیرم
and breastfeed them.	و شیر می دهم
Sound, sound, only sound,	صدا، صدا، تنها صدا
the sound of water’s lucid desire to flow	صدای خواهش شفاف آب به جاری شدن
the sound of the pouring of starlight on the wall of the earth’s femininity	صدای ریزش نور ستاره بر جدار مادگی خاک
the sound of the formation of the foetus of meaning	صدای انعقاد نطفه ی معنی
and the expansion of love’s communal mind	و بسط ذهن مشترک عشق
sound, sound, sound, it is only sound that remains.	صدا، صدا، صدا، تنها صداست که می ماند
In the land of dwarfs,	در سرزمین قدکوتاهان
the criteria of evaluations	معیارهای سنجش
have always travelled in the orbit of zero.	همیشه بر مدار صفر سفر کرده اند
Why should I stop?	چرا توقف کنم؟
I obey the four elements	من از عناصر چهارگانه اطاعت می کنم
and codification of the constitution of my heart	و کار تدوین نظامنامه ی قلبم
is not a task for the local government of the blind.	کار حکومت محلی کوران نیست
What have I got to do with the lengthy howling of wildness in animals’ sexual organs?	مرا به زوزه دراز توحش در عضو جنسی حیوان چکار
What have I got to do with the pathetic movement of a worm in a fleshy vacuum?	مرا به حرکت حقیر کرم در خلأ گوشتی چکار

The bloodstained ancestry of flowers has committed me to life

مرا تبار خونی گلها به زیستن متعهد کرده است

Do you know the bloodstained ancestry of the flowers? (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 79-81)

تبار خونی گلها میدانید؟

I suggest that these binaries are working together to put into perspective a major conflict between the speaker and the establishment. This antagonism is most clearly expressed when the poet refuses to allow "the local government of the blind" to codify the constitution of her heart. The word محلی, translated here as local, is also used in Farsi to refer to something provincial. The word حکومت, translated as government, I suggest refers to the majority who determined the norms in life or in art in her time. Therefore, "the local government of the blind" refers to a group of people, artists, and intellectuals with a provincial mentality who are blind to other possibilities in life and art due to a lack of imagination and ambition but still try to codify her heart by imposing their takes on poetry, life, morality, and propriety on her.

The members of this "local government of the blind" and their characteristics are highlighted throughout the poem. The first such stanza reads, "And day is a vastness that doesn't fit into the limited imagination of a newspaper worm". To understand this line, the semantic meanings of two words must be teased out. In Farsi, روز, translated here as "day", can also refer to life. "Newspaper worm", a neologism of the poet's, has no semantic context in Farsi, and its meaning can be only constructed through its syntactic context. The speaker refers to the "newspaper worm" as someone with a limited imagination, who is not capable of imagining the vastness of life and its potential. Another scornful word is نامرد, translated here as "unmanly one", which refers to anyone who lacks courage. The "cockroach"—with connotations of being revolting

and feeble—is another example. Further, the poet talks about the "dwarfs" and their land in which "the criteria of evaluations / has always travelled in the orbit of zero." It is a land where everything in life and art is judged based on a dwarfish vision. I suggest that the stanza "Collaboration of lead letters is in vain / Collaboration of lead letters will not save the lowly thought", is about expressing those limited visions of the establishment. "Collaboration of lead letters" refers to publishing in a printing house, mostly a privilege of the elites. The speaker conveys that thought being published does not in itself save it from being lowly and dwarfish.

In opposition to "the local government of the blind", the speaker does not follow established norms in either life or poetry, but obeys "the four elements". In ancient Greece, fire, water, air, and earth were understood to be the elements that sustained life, forming both the universe and human bodies. The universal quality of these four elements is represented as determining the poet's life and art, in contrast to the provinciality of "the local government of the blind". A few lines later, however, she makes it clear that for her, following nature is not about physical intimacy: "What have I got to do with the pathetic movement of a worm in a fleshy vacuum?" she writes, contesting the very point often put forward by her critics. What has committed her to life is rather "the bloodstained ancestry of flowers". Flowers in Persian poetry are used figuratively to describe women. A beautiful woman's skin is often described as finer than a rose petal. Perhaps that is the same skin which has been bloodstained for centuries and makes her discard the idea of stopping.

The "I" in this poem is sure about her path "through the capillaries of life"; does not care for the judgment of the "newspaper worm"; and does not intend to consult "the local government of the blind" on the personal matters of her heart and life.

Nonetheless, the self-assurance depicted by the speaker of this poem seems to be short-lived.

"Green Delusion" is a poem which, like "Only Sound Remains", belongs to the time considered the period of Farrokhzad's "rebirth" by critics. The persona of this poem is filled with remorse, regrets, self-doubt, and craving for a simpler life. Two iterations in this poem set the theme of the text: "Which summit, which peak?", iterated three times, and "I couldn't, I just couldn't anymore", iterated twice. These two lines, read together, will reveal the theme of the poem to be one of weariness and disillusionment. In this poem the "me" has taken over and is talking through the "I".

The whole day I was crying in the mirror.	تمام روز را در آئینه گریه میکردم
Spring had passed my window	بهار پنجره ام را
to the trees' green delusion.	به وهم سبز درختان سپرده بود
My body did not fit into the cocoon of my loneliness	تنم به پیلهٔ تنهائیم نمیگنجید
and the odour of my paper crown	و بوی تاج کاغذیم
had polluted the air of that sunless realm (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 117).	فضای آن قلمرو بی آفتاب را آلوده کرده بود

The poem starts with the speaker crying in front of the mirror, which is not a short cry evoked by the whims of the moment, but continues throughout the whole day. A few stanzas later, she writes, "The whole day my gaze was staring into my life's eyes", which suggests that what has been making her cry the whole day is the reflection of her life in the mirror. The eyes of her life are anxious and frightened and avoid meeting her eyes, as a liar's would.

Immediately after this line, she continues, “Spring had passed my window / to the trees’ green delusion”. Spring is a special season in Iranian culture, since it marks the beginning of the New Year. Moreover, it figuratively represents rebirth, growth, and a new start, as Iranians pray for in one of their most famous prayers at the first moments of the New Year. Trees symbolise growth and a window’s main function is to provide light, which in Farsi has always been associated with truth as well as zest for life. Now spring—the very promise of rebirth—has deprived her of light, of truth, and of passion for life, by handing her window over to trees and their green delusion, their false promise of growth.

The speaker continues, “my body would not fit into the cocoon of my loneliness, / and the odour of my paper crown / had polluted the air of that sunless realm”. The lonely woman is wearing a crown made of paper, similar to what children would wear in their games. The paper crown conveys how she feels about the recognition she has finally received as a poet: now, in the absence of the window and sunlight, it has turned musty around her head.

I couldn’t, I just couldn’t anymore	نمیتوانستم، دیگر نمیتوانستم
sound of the alley, sound of the birds	صدای کوچه، صدای پرنده ها
sound of the broadcloth balls getting lost	صدای گمشدن توپ های ماهوتی
and the running frenzy of children	و هایهوی گریزان کودکان
and dancing of balloons	و رقص بادکنک ها
which were ascending like soap bubbles	که چون حباب های کف صابون
at the end of a rope	در انتهای ساقه ای از نخ صعود میکردند
and wind, and wind as if it was	و باد، باد که گوئی

breathing in the deepest dark moments of lovemaking	در عمق گودترین لحظه های تیرهٔ همخوابگی نفس میزد
they were all squeezing the fence of my quiescent castle of confidence	حصار قلعهٔ خاموش اعتماد مرا فشار میدادند
and through old cracks, were calling my heart’s name.	و از شکافهای کهنه، دلم را بنام میخواندند
The whole day my gaze	تمام روز نگاه من
was staring into my life’s eyes	به چشمهای زندگیم خیره گشته بود
into those anxious frightened eyes	به آن دو چشم مضطرب ترسان
who were evading my fixed gaze	که از نگاه ثابت من میگریختند
and like liars,	و چون دروغگویان
were taking asylum in the safe seclusion of eyelids.	به انزوای بی خطر پلکها پناه میآوردند
Which summit, which peak?	کدام قله کدام اوج؟
Aren’t all these winding roads	مگر تمامی این راههای پیچاپیچ
ceasing to exist in that cold sucking mouth?	در آن دهان سرد مکنده به نقطهٔ پایان نمیرسند؟
What did you give me, O you words, you deceivers of the credulous, and you, the abstinence of flesh and desires?	به من چه دادید، ای واژه های ساده فریب و ای ریاضت اندامها و خواهش ها؟
If I put a flower in my hair	اگر گلی به گیسوی خود میزدم
wouldn’t that be more enticing than this fraud, than this paper crown, which has rotted on the top of my head?	از این تقلب، از این تاج کاغذین که بر فراز سرم بو گرفته است، فریبنده تر نبود؟
How the desert’s spirit captured me	چگونه روح بیابان مرا گرفت
and the charm of the moon distanced me from the faith of the herd	و سحر ماه ز ایمان گله دورم کرد!

How did the incompleteness of my heart grow	چگونه ناتمامی قلبم بزرگ شد
and no other half completed this half!	و هیچ نیمه ای این نیمه را تمام نکرد!
How did I wait and see	چگونه ایستادم و دیدم
that earth was vanishing under my feet	زمین زیر دو پایم ز تکیه گاه خالی می شود
and the warmth of my mate's body	و گرمی تن جفتم
cannot meet the frivolous expectation of my body! (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 118-120)	به انتظار پوچ تنم راه نمیبرد!

It is interesting to see how the word "sound" in "Green Delusion" conveys different meanings and connotations from in "Only Sound Remains". In "Green Delusion", unlike "Only Sound Remains", sound does not represent poetry and art, but day-to-day life: alley, birds, broadcloth balls, wind, and children. These do not promise immortality through art, but squeeze her confidence and give rise to self-doubt by reminding her of all the sacrifices she has made for her art. The same goes for the concept of death. In "Only Sound Remains", "a bird which had died" reminds her of the importance of remembering the flight, and encourages her not to stop but to continue on her chosen path. However, in "Green Delusion", she asks, "Aren't all these winding roads / ceasing to exist in that cold sucking mouth?" and the unavoidability of death makes what she has achieved as an artist seem as worthless as a "paper crown". She is the credulous one, deceived by words, who has sacrificed her desire for her art—perhaps the desire to have a simple life as a "whole" woman which she describes later in the poem. She continues in the poem by wondering how she was captured by "desert's spirit" and was distanced from "the faith of the herd" by "the charm of the moon". The word ماه, translated here as moon, represents beauty in Farsi. The phrase "the faith of the herd" refers to the beliefs of the majority. The magic of beauty and art has distracted her and

led her astray from the norms defined by the majority both in life and in poetry, and has turned her into a lonely woman.

Which summit, which peak?	کدام قله کدام اوج؟
Give me asylum, o bewildered lights	مرا پناه دهید ای چراغ های مشوش
O dubious bright houses	ای خانه های روشن شکاک
on whose sunny roofs, washed clothes are swaying in the embrace of scented smoke.	که جامه های شسته در آغوش دودهای معطر بر بامهای آفتابیتان تاب میخورند
Give me asylum, O simple whole women	مرا پناه دهید ای زنان سادهٔ کامل
whose slender fingertips, from above the skin, trace the delightful movement of a foetus	که از ورای پوست سرانگشت های نازکتان مسیر جنبش کیف آور جنینی را دنبال میکند
and in whose collar the air always smells of fresh milk	و در شکاف گریبانتان همیشه هوا به بوی شیر تازه میآمیزد
Which summit, which peak?	کدام قله؟ کدام اوج؟
Give me asylum, oh you, flamed stoves—horseshoes of happiness—and the singing of copper dishes in smoke-smudged kitchens	مرا پناه دهید ای اجاقهای پرآتش—ای نعلهای خوشبختی— و ای سرود ظرفهای مسین درسیاهکاری مطبخ
and the sad twitter of sewing machine	و ای ترنم دلگیر چرخ خیاطی
and the day-and-night battle of mop and carpet	و ای جدال روز و شب فرشها و جاروها
give me asylum all the greedy loves	مرا پناه دهید ای تمام عشقهای حریصی
whose painful desire to survive covers the bed—in which you're possessed— by magic water and fresh spots of blood (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 120-121).	که میل دردناک بقا بستر تصرفتان را به آب جادو و قطره های خون تازه میآراید

These stanzas create the image of the life of a “simple whole woman”, the life of a homemaker that includes making and washing clothes, cooking, cleaning the house, getting pregnant, and breastfeeding. The line “Give me asylum, O simple whole women” implies the poet’s craving for such a life. In Farsi, the word کامل, translated here as whole, means something or someone that is complete, and can also mean wise. She wants to be given asylum by those women whom she considers the wise and complete ones. Unlike in “Only Sound Remains”, in which stagnancy and repetition are associated with death, here the repetition of these day-to-day tasks is associated with being whole and complete.

The whole day, the whole day	تمام روز تمام روز
abandoned, abandoned, like a corpse on the water	رها شده، رها شده، چون لاشه ای بر آب
I was drifting towards the most terrifying rock	به سوی سهمناک ترین صخره پیش میرفتم
towards the deepest water-caves	به سوی ژرفترین غارهای دریائی
and flesh-eating fish	و گوشخوارترین ماهیان
and my spine	و مهره های نازک پشتم
was twinging with the sensation of death.	از حس مرگ تیر کشیدند
I couldn’t, I couldn’t anymore.	نمی توانستم دیگر نمی توانستم
My feet echoed with the denial of the path	صدای پایم از انکار راه بر میخواست
and my despair had grown larger than my spirit’s endurance (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 122).	و یأسم از صبوری روحم وسیعتر شده بود

She feels the sensation of death in her spine and sees herself as an abandoned corpse. The imagery of a dreadful death by flesh-eating fish appears right before she announces

that she cannot continue anymore. Her feet “echoed with the denial of the path”, the path that in “Only Sound Remains” passed “through the capillaries of life”. Now every step makes her question her choice and her path.

She, or a disillusioned weary version of her, ends this poem with a sad realisation as spring, the very promise of growth and rebirth, tells her that her life has never been one of progress and growth, but one of decline.

And that spring, and that green delusion	و آن بهار، و آن وهم سبز
which was passing by the window,	که بر دریچه گذر داشت،
was saying to my heart	با دلم میگفت
“Look	"نگاه کن
“you never advanced,	"تو هیچگاه پیش نرفتی
“you have descended.” (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 122)	تو فرو رفتی."

In contrast to “Only Sound Remains” and its expression of confidence in the poet’s chosen path, “Green Delusion” narrates the sense of being cheated out of something real for a sham. It suggests that she has been deceived into finding words more alluring than a flower in her hair and by false promises of growth that have taken away her chance of being a “simple whole woman” and that have brought her nothing in return but a “paper crown”.

Farrokhzad’s confessional and self-revealing poetry reflects her life. However, the picture reflected in this mirror is not whole; it is divided and fragmented by the constant struggle between the “I” and the “me”. Farrokhzad’s poetry is that of a divided subject who even at the peak of her creativity, even when she had finally managed to establish

herself as a respected poet and artist, did not stop questioning herself and the choices she had made in life.

Farrokhzad's life and poetry were filled with pleasure, a craving for love, and a sense of guilt, remorse, regret, and self-doubt. The transition from self-doubt to self-confidence, from remorse to acceptance, and from regret to contentment was never complete. Farrokhzad continued to wrestle her demons until the very end.

In the next section, I argue that ambivalence and fluctuations between self-doubt and self-confidence stayed central to Farrokhzad's life and its mirror, her poetry, due to her unconventional approach to love, which was mocked and reproached by the society of her time and fed into her inner conflicts.

2.2.3. Forugh Farrokhzad and unconventional love

Forgive her	بر او ببخشائید
the one whose inside has torn into pieces	بر او که از درون متلاشیست
but still the peel of her eyes are burning	اما هنوز پوست چشمانش
by picturing the particles of light	از تصور ذرات نور می سوزد
and her futile hair	و گیسوان بیهده اش
are hopelessly trembling by the breath of love (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 44).	نومیدوار از نفوذ نفس های عشق میلرزند

Farrokhzad tried to coin her own subjectivity according to her own individual understanding and against the accepted norms of her society, and expected to be accepted if not praised. However, societies function in a different manner: they punish and regulate whoever challenges their spirit and ethos.

Forugh longed for her father's approval almost her whole life, as can be concluded from her letters (Katouzian 2010, p. 11). In a sense, her father embodied the society that refused to recognise her as an individual and pushed her to the verge of nervous breakdowns over and over again, mainly because, I argue, she fashioned her sexuality against the ethos of her time and pursued love in an unconventional manner in both her life and her poetry. Her father called her a "street woman" (a phrase used to describe a prostitute), while as Hillmann (1986, p. 139) writes:

> … many women around her, including the wives of literary figures, felt reluctant to develop relationships with her because they saw her either as a potential home-wrecking threat to themselves or as a disgrace to their sex.

A few decades after her death, the way sexuality continues to be perceived by many Iranian women can explain the hostile attitudes towards her of women of her time. Merghati-Khoei, in *Language of love in culture of silence*, explores the development of the sexual understanding of Iranian women (aged nineteen to eighty-two) who migrated to Australia after the age of sixteen. She demonstrates that all thirty-three informants "sought reproductive sexuality within heterosexual marriage" (2006, p. 15). The study found that during childhood, the family managed the informant's sexuality. After puberty, society and its traditional culture of sexuality based on "purity", "chastity", "honour", and "honesty" governed sexuality. The women informants in the study were found to have acquired a sexual subjectivity which manifested itself through the institution of marriage and expressed itself through conflicting phrases such as "a proper wife" and "a sexually successful woman" (Merghati-Khoei, 2006, p. vi). Moreover, it has been observed that eighty-one percent of Iranian men and women

consider virginity to be indispensable for women prior to their marriage (Sadeghi, 2008, p. 255). This dominant attitude towards sexuality is in complete contrast to Forugh Farrokhzad's understanding of love and desire.

I am not talking about the frail union of two names	سخن از پیوند سست دو نام
and lovemaking in the old pages of a registry	و همآغوشی در اوراق کهنهٔ یک دفتر نیست
I'm talking about my fortunate tress	سخن از گیسوی خوشبخت منست
with the burnt anemone of your kiss	با شقایقهای سوختهٔ بوسهٔ تو
and the amity of our bodies, in gaiety,	و صمیمیت تن هامان، در طراری
and the glint of our nakedness	و درخشیدن عریانیمان
like fish scales in the water (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 126-127).	مثل فلس ماهی ها در آب

Farrokhzad searched for love throughout her life, and in a socially unaccepted manner, which turned her into an outsider. When she was only fifteen she went on a hunger strike to marry the man she loved against the dominant practice of arranged marriage and despite both families' disapproval (Milani, 2016, p. 38). This first love experience was a failure, since she found the love defined by traditional gender roles constraining and as stifling as living in a cage. This early experience of love left her confused, frustrated, and at times angry.

You don't make me feel warm anymore	دیگرم گرمی نمی بخشی
O love, you frozen sun	عشق ای خورشید یخ بسته

my heart is a wilderness of despair	سینه ام صحرای نومیدی است
I’m weary, weary even of love	خسته ام از عشق هم خسته

(Farrokhzad, 1968b, p. 92).

Love for her is like the sun, a source of life, that now fails to provide any warmth: a “frozen sun”. She has failed to find a man whose love could miraculously transform her to “an angel of paradise”. This failure is reflected in the image of male egotism portrayed in her poetry at this period.

They taught him nothing but desire	به او جز از هوس چیزی نگفتند
he was only interested in appearances	در او جز جلوهٔ ظاهر ندیدند
Wherever he went, they whispered in his ears	بهرجا رفت در گوشش سرودند
women were created for pleasure (Farrokhzad, 1973, p. 58).	که زن را بهر عشرت آفریدند

There are moments in her early poetry, for example in the poem “Harlot”, when she agrees with society’s prejudice; when the “me” dominates the “I” and calls herself weak, vexatious, and a harlot, as her father did. At this stage of her life, even if love was possible, she did not see herself as worthy of it.

Leave me since I’m vexatious	از پیش من برو که دل آزارم
labile and weak and unrighteous	ناپایدار و سست و گنهکارم
in my chest a crazed heart	در کنج سینه یک دل دیوانه
and in my heart thousands of desires	در کنج دل هزار هوس دارم...

Your love, like a ray of moonlight	عشق تو همچو پرتو مهتابست
had lit unwittingly a swamp	تابیده بی خبر به لجن زاری
like the raining of blessings	باران رحمتی است که می بارد
on the stony heart of a sinner (Farrokhzad, 1973, p. 29-30)	بر سنگلاخ قلب گنهکاری...

Moreover, in an interview for *Arash* magazine, she talks of her understanding of relationships in a manner which confirms her disillusionment with love and its supposed ability to compensate for everything lacking in one's life:

> Some try to compensate for their inadequacies in life by seeking asylum in others … but it can never be gained. If it could, wouldn't this very relationship be the best poetry written in the universe? The relationship between two people cannot be complete or completing … least of all nowadays (Farrokhzad as cited in Milani 1982, p. 122).

Despite society's prejudices and her own doubts and disappointments, Farrokhzad never fully stopped her unconventional pursuit of love. It seems that when her life was "nothing anymore but the tick tock of a wall clock", she had already realised that she had no choice but "to love madly". As her understanding of love and its limits matured, she freed herself from its traditional definitions and norms. In a letter to Ibrahim Golestan, her long-time lover, she said:

> I'm evolving, even in the way I love. I feel like nothing can threaten my love for you anymore as it has grown and acquired such depth that can stand above

> all threats. It has become part of my blood and breath…I don't want you to be only with me. No, I just want you *to be*. Like the sun that until it exists, there will be light and hope. (Farrokhzad as cited in Milani, 2016, pp. 391–393)

This evolution can also be traced in her poetry, as love transcends pre-defined social norms and gender roles and she acquires the role of the lover, the one who desires while desired. In her later poetry love is more realistic, balanced, and a source of creativity; it is accompanied by free choice, responsibility, and the willingness to face the possible consequences of seeking such love, as described in "Conquest of the Garden":

That crow which flew	آن کلاغی که پرید
over our heads	از فراز سر ما
and sank into the thought of a vagrant cloud	و فرو رفت در اندیشهٔ ابری ولگرد
and whose sound, like a short spear	و صدایش همچون نیزهٔ کوتاهی،
traversed the expanse of the horizon	پهنای افق را پیمود
will take the news of us to the town	خبر ما را با خود خواهد برد به شهر
Everybody knows	همه میدانند
Everybody knows	همه میدانند
that you and I saw the garden through	که من و تو از آن روزنهٔ سرد عبوس
that cold grimy aperture	باغ را دیدیم
and plucked the apple	و از آن شاخهٔ بازیگر دور از دست
from that playful distant branch	سیب را چیدیم
Everybody is afraid	همه میترسند
Everybody is afraid, but you and I	همه میترسند اما من و تو

به چراغ و آب و آیینه پیوستیم	joined the light and water and mirror
و نترسیدیم…	without fear…
سخن از پچ پچ ترسانی در ظلمت نیست	I'm not talking about timid whispers in the dark
سخن از روز است و پنجره های باز و هوای تازه	I'm talking about daytime and open windows and fresh air
و اجاقی که در آن اشیاء بیهده میسوزند	and a stove in which useless things burn
و زمینی که ز کشتی دیگر بارور است	and a land which is fertile with another plantation
و تولد و تکامل و غرور	and birth and growth and pride
سخن از دستان عاشق ماست	I'm talking about our amorous hands
که پلی از پیغام عطر و نور و نسیم	which have built across nights a bridge
بر فراز شبها ساخته اند	of promise of fragrance and light and breeze (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 125-128).

In Persian literature, both the crow and its sound are bad omens, and crows are considered to be gossips and wicked (Tajbakhsh & Qarqani, 2010, p. 42). In this poem, the crow reveals the story of their love to others. The poem alludes to the fall of Adam and Eve, but here "you and I saw the garden through that cold grimy aperture and plucked the apple"—a mutual decision that no one person alone should be blamed for the consequences of—and in so doing, they join light, water, and mirror. All these words have positive connotations in Persian literature. Light has a direct connection with truth, water with life, and mirror with heart. Unlike others who are afraid and keep their love affairs a secret in the dark, for her, love is a cause of growth and a source of pride. It is a transparent affair and a free choice made with no fear and in daylight. Night in Farsi, in contrast to light and daytime, is traditionally associated with evil. When her hand joins her lover's, it creates a bridge over night and at the same time promises

"fragrance and light and breeze", all of which positively engage our senses and create the sense of being alive. In this poem, Farrokhzad's perception of love has evolved from an immature, unrealistic, and egotistical love to one that is reciprocal and does not lack in intellectual and emotional connection.

In a letter written a few months before her premature death, she wrote that she was happy that she was not idealistic and dreamy anymore and that she had found herself (Katouzian, 2010, p. 15)—as if she was ready for the wounds love had to offer and to accept love as it really was, kind at times, cruel and even deceitful at others, and with no miraculous power to transform her into "an angel of paradise". As she wrote in the posthumously published "Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season":

All my wounds are from love	و زخم های من همه از عشق است
from love, love, love…	از عشق، عشق، عشق…
How kind you were my *yaar*	چه مهربان بودی ای یار،
my dearest *yaar*	ای یگانه ترین یار
how kind you were when you lied	چه مهربان بودی وقتی دروغ میگفتی
how kind you were when you were closing the eyelids of the mirrors	چه مهربان بودی وقتی که پلکهای آینه را میبستی
and were picking chandelier from their steel branches	و چلچراغها را از ساقه های سیمی میچیدی
and in the cruel darkness you were taking me to the pastures of love	ودر سیاهی ظالم مرا بسوی چراگاه عشق میبردی
until that confused vapour	تا آن بخار گیج
which was the tail of the fire of thirst	که دنباله ی حریق عطش بود

would settle on the meadow of sleep	بر چمن خواب مینشست

(Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 18-25)

Disillusioned with love, she still pursued it in her uncustomary manner; this made her feel simultaneously blessed and depressed and fed into her inner conflicts. As she wrote in her poem “In the Green Water of Summers”: “Blessed, since we love, / depressed, since love is a curse” (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 39). Her pursuit of love had eventually ridden itself from unrealistic expectations and was accompanied with the knowledge that the unrealistically perfect, complete and completing love is unattainable.

I know a sad little fairy	من پری کوچک غمگینی را می شناسم
who lives in an ocean	که در اقیانوسی مسکن دارد
and plays her heart into a wooden flute	و دلش را در یک نی لبک چوبین
slowly, ever so slowly,	می نوازد آرام، آرام
a sad little fairy	پری کوچک غمگینی
who dies with a kiss at night	که شب از یک بوسه میمیرد
and will be born again with a kiss at dawn	و سحرگاه از یک بوسه به دنیا خواهد آمد

(Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 169).

3. The personal becomes political: confession in the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad

Confession has become an inseparable part of Western culture, to the extent that Foucault asserts "Western man has become a confessing animal," (Foucault, 1976, p. 56). The technology of verbalising confession has remained important in Christianity, and also in psychoanalysis as its secular counterpart. This is in contrast with Islam, where confession is a private affair between the sinner and God, with no need to verbalise the sin in front of a third party. Moreover, in Iranian culture, saving face is integral to every aspect of everyday life; one does not need to be religious in order to find verbalisation of private affairs and thoughts inappropriate. Hillmann (1986, p. 152) has identified that for many Iranians, social propriety is defined by people's approval. This, and other factors such as fear of political incrimination over any honest or direct speech, can explain why there is almost no biography or autobiography written of any prominent cultural or literary figures in Iran (Hillmann, 1986, p. 149).

The poetry of modern Persian poets such as Nima, Akahvan, Shamlu, and Sepehri is self-oriented; that is, they have individualised voices and express their ideas through a first-person speaker. However, they avoid writing autobiographical poetry. In contrast, Farrokhzad "looks at herself in the mirror, records what she sees, and risks a great deal in representing it as faithfully as she can in her poetry" (Hillmann, 1986, p. 109). The absence of confession in the religious and cultural arenas of Iranian society

makes one wonder what Farrokhzad's real "sin" was: having crossed the defined social and moral red lines, or confessing it aloud?

An article by Shahmordai and Sameni (2016, pp. 3–7) has analysed confessional elements in the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad by exploring poems such as "Rebellion", "The Ring", "Red Rose", "Sin", and "The Devil of Night". The study focuses on yearning for paternal love, communicating passion in matrimony, searching for sex, love and identity, the sense of inadequacy, and confronting despondence, distress and anxiety. However, the point that has been overlooked in dealing with the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad is how the personal becomes political in her poems. I illustrate this point through the close reading of her poem "I Feel Pity for the Garden", which—unlike poems such as "Sin" or "Red Rose" that incorporate love and desire—is generally not treated as one of her confessional poems. I argue that the poem is confessional, as the speaker invites strangers into her parents' house and shares with them what she is honour-bound not to. In doing so, she trespasses the boundaries of the social and cultural convention of her society.

Similar to Robert Lowell and his "ambivalence about his family's legacy of privilege and dysfunction" (Sol, 2019, p. 105), Farrokhzad draws on her personal experience and reveals demeaning information about her family's ignorance. The poem explicates the relationship between each family member's characteristics and worldview and the imminent demise of the yard garden, and functions as a poetic reconstruction of the society of the time and its ethos.

No one thinks about the flowers	کسی به فکر گل ها نیست
no one thinks about the fish	کسی به فکر ماهی ها نیست

no one wants to believe	کسی نمی خواهد
that the garden is dying	باور کند که باغچه دارد می میرد
that the heart of the garden has swollen under the sun,	که قلب باغچه در زیر آفتاب ورم کرده است
that the mind of the garden, ever so slowly,	که ذهن باغچه دارد آرام آرام
is getting empty of green memories	از خاطرات سبز تهی می شود
and the garden's emotion is like something abstract	و حس باغچه انگار
that has rotten in the garden's seclusion (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 51).	چیز مجردست که در انزوای باغچه پوسیده ست.

The speaker starts by highlighting everyone's ignorance of the demise of the garden. The garden's heart is rotting; its mind is getting empty of any "green memories", memories of life; it loses the ability to feel, the ability to think; and therefore it is dying. However, no one wants to acknowledge its death. The rest of the poem describes their reactions.

Father says:	پدر می گوید:
"My time has passed	"از من گذشته ست
my time has passed	از من گذشته ست
I carried my burden	من بار خود را بردم
and did my share."	و کار خود را کردم"
And in his room, from dawn to dusk,	و در اتاقش، از صبح تا غروب،
he either reads *Shahnameh*	یا شاهنامه می خواند

or *Nasekh-al-tavarikh*	یا ناسخ التواریخ
Father says to mother:	پدر به مادر می گوید:
“God may damn all the fish and all the birds,	"لعنت به هرچه ماهی و هرچه مرغ
when I’m dead	وقتی که من بمیرم دیگر
what difference does it make if there’s a garden	چه فرق می کند که باغچه باشد
or there is not a garden,	یا باغچه نباشد
my retirement salary is enough for me.” (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 53-54)	برای من حقوق تقاعد کافی ست."

The father, who believes he has done his share, refuses to take any more responsibility and does not care what happens to society after he is gone, as long as he receives his retirement salary. He lives a frivolous life and stays in his room all day long to read *Shahnameh* and *Nasekh al-tavarikh.* The latter is a narrative of the lives of prophets from Adam to Prophet Muhammad and his grandsons. *Shahnameh*, or *The book of kings*, is a collection of epic poems, a mythical reconstruction of the Persian Empire until its defeat by Muslim conquerors. Reading *Shahnameh* highlights that the father is nostalgic for the glorious past, with no regard for the future.

My mother’s entire life	مادر تمام زندگی اش
is a prayer rug spread	سجاده ایست گسترده
at the threshold of the fear of hell	در آستان وحشت دوزخ
My mother checks everything	مادر همیشه در ته هر چیزی
in search of a sin	دنبال جای پای معصیتی می گردد
And she thinks that the blasphemy of a plant	و فکر می کند که باغچه را کفر یک گیاه

has polluted the garden.	آلوده کرده است.
She prays the whole day	مادر تمام روز دعا می خواند
She is a natural-born sinner	مادر گناهکار طبیعی ست
She blows prayers at all flowers	و فوت می کند به تمام گل ها
and at all fish	و فوت می کند به تمام ماهی ها
and at herself	و فوت می کند به خودش
She is waiting for the coming of the saviour	مادر در انتظار ظهور است
and the blessing which will follow (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 54-55).	و بخششی که نازل خواهد شد.

The mother lives in constant fear of God's punishment, and to avoid his wrath she is constantly searching for any possible sinful act. Unlike the father, she is not completely apathetic towards the fate of Iranian society. She does not deny that the society is in trouble, but she blames it on people's blasphemous thoughts—a relatively common belief that sin and blasphemy can be responsible for anything from poverty to natural disasters. However, her actions are limited to praying the whole day and then blowing her prayers over everything to bring protection upon them, a way of seeking protection among practicing Muslims. Believing in the coming of "The Saviour"—the twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, who went to occultation and will return one day to restore an Islamic government and justice—is an important part of the Shia doctrine. For some intellectuals, waiting for "The Saviour" is associated with evading social responsibilities. The mother represents that segment of society that lives an idle life and does not take any real social responsibilities, but is waiting for the coming of "The Saviour" and God's blessing that will accompany him.

My brother calls the garden a graveyard	برادرم به باغچه می گوید قبرستان
my brother laughs at the confusion of greenery	برادرم به اغتشاش علف ها می خندد
and counts the fish corpses which	و از جنازه ی ماهی ها
are turning into rotten particles	که زیر پوست بیمار آب
under the water's sick skin	به ذره های فاسد تبدیل می شوند شماره بر می دارد
My brother is addicted to philosophy	برادرم به فلسفه معتاد است
For my brother the garden's healing	برادرم شفای باغچه را
lies in its destruction.	در انهدام باغچه می داند.
He gets drunk	او مست می کند
and punches walls and doors	و مشت می زند به در و دیوار
and tries to tell that	و سعی می کند که بگوید
he is extremely agonised and weary and disheartened.	بسیار دردمند و خسته و مأیوس است
He takes his despair	او ناامیدیش را هم
along with his ID card and calendar and handkerchief and lighter and pen	مثل شناسنامه و تقویم و دستمال و فندک و خودکارش
to the street and bazaar.	همراه خود به کوچه و بازار می برد
And his despair	و ناامیدیش
is so small that every night it disappears	آنقدر کوچک است که هر شب
in the hustle and bustle of the bar (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 55-56)	در ازدحام میکده گم می شود.

The brother reads philosophy, smokes cigarettes, and drinks alcohol—the skin-deep characteristics of the intellectuals of the time. He looks down on the garden by calling

it a “graveyard”, and its condition amuses him. The verse that refers to the brother counting fish corpses highlights his carefree attitude towards death and destruction. He has no faith in the garden in its current form, and sees its salvation in its destruction and complete reconstruction. Unlike the speaker, who finishes this poem by saying that she thinks “the garden can be taken into a hospital”, he does not believe in reforms.

Every description of the brother’s life points towards his superficiality. The speaker describes his interest in philosophy as an addiction, which has a negative connotation, and believes that even his despondency is superficial, as he is not weary but “tr[ies]” to show that he is weary. While talking about the brother’s disappointment with society, she describes it as “so tiny” that it disappears after a few drinks at a bar. The brother shares the same passive attitude as the mother, only here the prayers are replaced by philosophy.

And my sister who was a friend of flowers	و خواهرم که دوست گل ها بود
and every time mother beat her	و حرف های ساده قلبش را
took the innocent complaints of her heart	وقتی که مادر او را می زد
to their simple and kind gathering	به جمع مهربان و ساکت آنها می برد
and sometimes treated the family of fish	و گاه گاه خانواده ی ماهی ها را
to cookies and sun…	به آفتاب و شیرینی مهمان می کرد...
her house is at the other side of the town.	او خانه اش در آنسوی شهر است
She, in the middle of her artificial house	او در میان خانه ی مصنوعیش
with her artificial goldfish	با ماهیان قرمز مصنوعیش
and sheltered with her artificial husband’s love	و در پناه عشق همسر مصنوعیش
and under the shade of artificial apple trees	و زیر شاخه های درختان سیب مصنوعی

sings artificial songs	آوازهای مصنوعی می خواند
and makes real babies.	و بچه های طبیعی می سازد
She,	او
whenever comes to visit us	هروقت که به دیدن ما می آید
and the fringe of her skirt gets tainted by the garden's poverty,	و گوشه های دامنش از فقر باغچه آلوده می شود
takes a bath of perfume.	حمام ادکلن می گیرد
She,	او
whenever comes to visit us,	هروقت به دیدن ما می آید
is pregnant (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 56-58).	آبستن است.

The word "artificial" is iterated five times while describing the sister's life. The speaker finds everything in the sister's life—her house, her relationship, even her singing, which may refer to her artistic aspirations—fake and superficial. The only real things that she makes are babies. However, in Farsi the phrase "making babies" is used instead of "giving birth" to belittle. There is a similarity between the character of the sister in this poem and the woman described in another poem, "The Clockwork Doll", in which Farrokhzad describes a woman with no real agency. She—who is "a beautiful and healthy female … with a body tight as leather / and two firm big breasts" (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 72-73) —does not have her own voice, but after every squeeze of a lewd hand calls "I love you" and "I'm so happy" in a "voice extremely false and alienated".

Once, the sister had the ability to sympathise and care, but after she gets married and moves to her house "at the other side of the town" she becomes alienated from her society and embarrassed by its poverty.

I’m afraid	من از زمانی
of a time that has lost its heart	که قلب خود را گم کرده است می ترسم
I’m afraid of picturing the futility of all these hands	من از تصور بیهودگی اینهمه دست
and imagining the alienation of all these faces.	و از تجسم بیگانگی اینهمه صورت می ترسم
I, like a student	من مثل دانش آموزی
who is madly in love with her geometry lesson,	که درس هندسه اش را
am alone.	دیوانه وار دوست می دارد تنها هستم
And I think the garden can be taken to a hospital	و فکر میکنم که باغچه را می شود به بیمارستان برد
I think…	من فکر می کنم...
I think…	من فکر می کنم...
I think…	من فکر می کنم...
And the heart of the garden has swollen under the sun	و قلب باغچه در زیر آفتاب ورم کرده است
and the mind of the garden, ever so slowly,	و ذهن باغچه دارد آرام آرام
is getting empty of green memories (Farrokhzad, 1975, p. 59-60).	از خاطرات سبز تهی می شود.

Metaphorically, the heart is associated with positive human emotions in Farsi, and its lack highlights the lack of love and sympathy—the very lack which alienates people and renders their actions futile. The phrase “I think” is iterated three times to emphasise

the pre-occupation of the speaker with the issues of her society, before she finishes the poem by repeating the concerns she reserves for the society's mind and heart, for its diminishing ability to rationally think and to sympathise.

This poem is highly personal; however, the father's nihilism, the mother's religious dogma, the brother's pseudo-intellectualism, and the sister's bourgeois attitudes portray the main trends in the spectrum of beliefs in Iranian society. Unlike other characters depicted in the poem, the speaker is able to see what the real issues of her society are, cares for the future and has faith in it, and thinks that its malaise is curable. Perhaps that is why she is alone, an outsider, the same as a "student who is madly in love with her geometry lesson".

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I will now turn to the creative component of the thesis—a novel named *Only sound remains*—its exploration of the life and poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad, and how it is related to the arguments made in my exegesis.

In this exegesis, I have explored two novel aspects of Farrokhzad's poetry: her unprecedented poetic discourse on women's sexuality, and her confessional style. Silence is the key element that connects sexuality and confession in Iranian culture. People are expected to practice silence when it comes to their sexuality, and thus, confession is absent from both religious and cultural arenas of Iranian society as it challenges this accepted code of silence. Farrokhzad ignored the moral norms of her society by moulding her sexuality according to her own understanding, and broke a millennium-old silence by confessing it aloud.

Farrokhzad was not the first Iranian poet to use a first-person speaker in her poetry; however, other contemporary poets expressed themselves through an impersonal "I", while Farrokhzad's self-referential "I" drew extensively on her life and experiences, in a literary culture that judged autobiographical writing to be "tasteless" (Hillmann, 1986, p. 153) and foolish. The exegetical discussion of confessional elements in Farrokhzad's poetry, however, focuses on a less explored aspect of her writing by looking at how the personal becomes political in her poetry through close reading of her poem "I Feel Pity for the Garden". Most intellectuals of the time were holding the authoritarian government and its Western supporters accountable for invasive social and cultural

issues. However, Farrokhzad explores the decadent of Iranian society by using her own family members to highlight that in the absence of self-evaluating individuals, social decay is inevitable.

Farrokhzad wrote candidly about love and desire, and through her confessional style, women's sexuality entered Persian poetry in a culture where the control of women's bodies had long been a collective obsession. Her poem "Sin" can be read as a frank confession of bodily desires. The speaker in the poem undermines the clichéd gender roles in Persian literature by assuming the position of lover, of someone who wants and desires autonomously—a prerogative traditionally held by men.

Further, ambivalence is at the core of her life and poetry, and therefore, I have argued, her life cannot be divided into two fully distinct periods, as is commonly claimed by critics—one filled with confusion, self-doubt, and remorse, during which she created her first three volumes of poetry, and another of her "rebirth", marked by self-confidence, growth, and autonomy, when she wrote *Another birth* and those poems published posthumously. Through a close reading of "Green Delusion" and "Only Sound Remains", I have shown that the transition from self-doubt to self-confidence, from remorse to acceptance, and from regret to contentment was never complete. Farrokhzad continued to wrestle with her demons until her death, primarily because she fashioned her sexuality and sought love against the ethos of her time.

Only sound remains revolves around Ismael's obsessive and one-sided love for Forugh. Moreover, a father-son relationship at the core of the novel provides a context from which to explore how patriarchy exerts its influence and informs power relations even at a personal level. Saeed, the narrator of the story, has been living in Adelaide for almost five years and is concerned about his return to Iran after publishing his first novel, *The imaginary narrative of a real murder*, which confronts political oppression

in Iran and thus puts him at risk of persecution. When his father Ismael pays him a visit, Saeed finds it peculiar, as at the age of seventy-five his father has never left Iran except for the Mecca pilgrimage.

It takes only a few days before Saeed realises that his father has not come all the way to Australia to visit him, but to confess a secret before his death. Through his father's confessional narrative, Saeed learns about his one-sided love for Forugh. *Only sound remains* narrates the story of this unrequited love, draws a picture of the sociopolitical life of Iran in Farrokhzad's time; and against this background tells the story of her endeavour to form her own subjectivity against the accepted norms of her society.

The novel extends my critical study of Farrokhzad's life and poetry by exploring the kinds of human interactions and discourses that dominated Iran at the time. The protagonist of the story, Ismael, embodies a typical male of the time in Iran—uncomfortable with his body, unable to communicate with the opposite sex, in love with utopian ideas, and cruel towards any woman who does not fit into his idea of a "proper" woman even if he is in love with her. Ismael's narration of his feelings and attitudes towards Forugh provides an avenue for exploring how Forugh's unconventional approach to life and poetry was perceived and judged by her society. Ismael is not capable of a transparent relationship with Forugh because he is similar to most men raised both physically and psychologically segregated from women. For Ismael, who is burdened by the constant struggle between his bodily desires and his spiritual aspirations, ambivalence is at the core of his feelings towards Forugh.

Ismael embodies the society that refused to recognise Forugh as an individual, and society's will to discipline is at the heart of his narrative. This point is illustrated in the scene when Ismael writes a piece, "The hypocrisy of pseudo-intellectuals of our time", for *Ferdowsi* magazine, in which he makes Forugh's love affair with Ibrahim public,

hoping to sabotage their relationship. He tries to punish and control Forugh for his own personal gain while pretending to be concerned with morality. This provides one example of how patriarchy exerts its power on whoever tries to challenge its ethos while disguising it as concern for morality and propriety. Another example is when, at a party held in a garden, two men approach Forugh, grab her arms and throw her into the pool, a prank they would never dare to pull on a "proper" woman who has the support of her husband or her father. Ismael does not object to the unseemly prank because, like everyone else at the party, he blames Forugh for behaving in a way that has emboldened strange men to treat her like a "street woman", as Forugh's father called her.

Only sound remains can be further read as a story of outsiders and their bleak fates: Forugh, a woman who challenges the tenets of her patriarchal society through her unconventional poetry and life choices; Maleki, a socialist who has no regard for patriarchy and is looking for democracy in a society where other activists are trying to replace one father (the Shah) with a stronger one (the Ayatollah); and Entezari, who spends his life providing a theoretical basis for the rule of the Ayatollah, but is discarded by the Ayatollah after questioning his authority as a father figure.

The Rostam Syndrome—rooted in the murder of the son by the father in the Iranian myth—is at the core of the novel. Entezari, who is a mentor for Ismael and introduces him to the idealistic world of Plato, serves the Ayatollah as a faithful son by setting the theoretical and theological basis for his rule. However, Entezari is disgraced by the Ayatollah as soon as he questions the Ayatollah's judgment and justice. Saeed's friend, Payam—who was kidnapped and then murdered during a protest—provides an example of disobedient sons who are silenced through violence.

Ismael's relationships with Entezari and Maleki and their political endeavours amongst the Shah's and the Ayatollah's struggle for power depicts the man's world

Forugh lived in—a world in which the voices of women were almost never heard beyond the walls of their homes. It is against this sociopolitical background that Forugh's achievements as a female artist can be deemed remarkable.

The novel does not cover Farrokhzad's life in detail, but is haunted by her presence. The story continues after her death, as her voice lives on and haunts Ismael. Farrokhzad's voice haunts Ismael's consciousness as it has the collective consciousness of Iranian society. A few decades after her death, Farrokhzad has turned into the equivalent of a "cult figure" (Milani, 2011, p. 154) in Iranian society. Perhaps she was right when she wrote:

I will plant my hands in the garden,	دستهایم را در باغچه میکارم
I will grow,	سبز خواهم شد،
I know, I know, I know (Farrokhzad, 1969, p. 167).	میدانم، میدانم، میدانم.

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