

# **A PERSIAN LOVE STORY IN ENGLISH**

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN WRITING A CROSS-CULTURAL  
IRANIAN NOVEL IN THE ROMANCE GENRE FOR A GLOBAL AUDIENCE

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

March 2018

## **IN THE NAME OF GOD**

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### **Statement of Originality**

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)  Date: 27/03/2018

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation, comprising a creative writing research component and an accompanying novel titled *Yousef's Sooreh*, aims to discover the challenges in writing cross-cultural romance fiction in English situated in Islamic contexts, such as in contemporary Iran. In its theoretical component – through the prism of postcolonial literature, diaspora/migrant literature, contemporary women's/feminist literature, translation/linguistic studies, and popular-fiction/literary romance genre – it utilises hermeneutics and content/textual analysis of such texts as post-revolutionary Iranian migrant novels (both diasporic fiction and non-fiction), as well as a number of non-Iranian cross-cultural romances or love stories, in regard to writing styles, language, figurative approaches, imagery, and so on. Concurrently and parallel to the research, the creative writing component – a fictional romance novel set in contemporary Iran with all Iranian characters – serves as a practical guide that shows the way while shedding light on these challenges, particularly when dealing with passionate love among devout minority of Iranian Muslims, a realm in which no prior study has been carried out. This novel depicts problematic areas of representation, through a cultural and religious perspective – where collectivism, patriarchy, elders' authority, rules of conduct between unrelated members of the opposite sex, and other cultural interactions and behaviours come into play, and can hinder the writing process in English – as well as taking a linguistic disciplinary approach where issues such as cultural translation from Persian, figures of speech, emotive variables, nonverbal language, untranslatable terms, glossing, annotation, and other linguistic issues become inevitable. It also explores the techniques and aesthetic possibilities of writing a cross-cultural romance that represents aspects of Iranian culture, life, and language for the global English-speaking readership, while focusing on Iranian minority of righteous Muslims.

*Keywords:* Cross-cultural literature, creative writing, Islamic inspirational romance, Muslim romance fiction, spiritual/chaste romance, feminist romance, cultural translation, diasporic literature, romance novel, Persian love story, migrant fiction.

To God  
And All His Prophets  
And Holy Figures

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

God is the first and foremost recipient of all the thanks my words fail to express. His love is what drove me and made it possible for me to carry out this research and write this novel about love.

I am truly indebted to my supervisor, Associate Professor Marcelle Freiman, who believed in what I had proposed to accomplish, and has continually supported me in actualising this dream. She will always be in my prayers.

I am also grateful to my father, Asghar Aghapour Khoei (RIP), my first tutor of unconditional love, and to my mother, Soghra Haghighat Khah, for her years and years of help throughout all my studies, and for being my number one motivator. My special thanks go to my family – and above all, my beautiful children – as well as my teachers, and professors in my home country Iran, and those in the USA and Australia. God bless them all.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Golden Orb Creative for assistance with proofreading, style, and formatting of this dissertation. Any mistakes are my own.



# **A PERSIAN LOVE STORY IN ENGLISH**

## **CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN WRITING A CROSS-CULTURAL IRANIAN NOVEL IN THE ROMANCE GENRE FOR A GLOBAL AUDIENCE**

### **Introduction**

God's love, I have always believed – as a religious woman of the Muslim faith – is what brings us into this world, what makes life worth living for us, and what takes us back to Him. So if birth, life, and death all revolve around one thing, we can never say enough about it or claim to have said it all. As Kristan Higgins (2015), a romance novelist, states, '[o]ur books are real, filled with the entire range of human emotions. They speak of the strongest and most universal yearning there is—to belong. To be accepted. To be loved' (p. 76). In my attempt to make a contribution in this regard and also to make a connection between spiritual and earthly love, I have written a romance novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*, in the context of my home country, Iran. As giving and joyful as it was to be composing such fiction, due to its specific nature, I faced certain challenges most other writers usually would not.

### **Purpose of this study**

The main goal of this study is to elaborate on the challenges a cross-cultural writer will encounter in writing a romance fiction in English. This study presents a search of contemporary Iranian migrant literature for guidance on their writing styles, language style, figurative approaches, and imagery. The focus is on those stories set in a foreign setting – mainly Iran in this case – where not much prior creative work has been done on the romance genre, and takes into account the sociolinguistic attributes as well as religious, cultural, and political characteristics of the context in which the story is written. Where possible, I offer solutions and remedies through some strategies to pave the way for future writers who might want to tread on the same path. I identify a number of such challenges, illuminate the issues authors are likely to face, and propose some solutions based on my

personal experience: decades of living in Iran, working as an interpreter/translator, writing my first novel<sup>1</sup> within the cross-cultural realm, and also having previous academic background in English literature and linguistics.

As Edward Said stated in his *Culture and Imperialism*, ‘stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history’ (1993, p. xii). To many foreigners, Iran is associated with only a few mental images – the dynasty of the former Shah, the Ayatollah Khomeini, the Islamic Revolution, the US embassy’s hostage crisis, the war between Iran and Iraq, the sanctions and the nuclear controversy, the political opposition to the USA – and in more general terms: a government and a nation in trouble and turmoil. I am eager to help foreign readers with less cultural familiarity go past these outer political surface shells and take them straight into Iranian families where people’s true identities can shine. Although, as any other fiction requires, my story contains sufficient political tints and shades, it is meant to be a journey within the lives of Iranian people, to see more vividly the true colours of Persianness, the Persian way of life, their routines, commonalities, traditions, customs, rituals, social and ethical codes of conduct, the domestic world of Muslim Persians, with special emphasis on the lives of Muslim Iranian women and their intimate relationships with men in contemporary Iran.

Love and romance can be defined as a range of various concepts to people of different nationalities. In fact, cultural background of the audience often affects their interpretation and understanding of a love story. Also, experiential love and romance are not the same as writing about them. That’s why what a writer intends to convey is not always what the reader<sup>2</sup> gets from a text. Larson (1973), while disagreeing with advocates of ‘universality in literature’, provides examples of what he calls ‘culturally restricted material’ (p. 77). In African societies, a ‘kiss’, for instance, is an unpractised and meaningless entity, and therefore non-existent in African novels, and so are long descriptive passages about nature. One should

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<sup>1</sup> *The Emptiest Arms, Book I*, a cross-cultural romance novel of 140 thousand words.

<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation there are numerous references to ‘the reader’ as my audience; however, my utilization of this term is by no means indicative of my viewing them as a homogenous body with disregard to their ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic, and educational background or even their age, gender, race, and/or other individual variables.

not, however, be misled into interpreting these as lack of love in Africans and should instead understand why an Occidental type of romance can confuse African readers (Larson, 1973). Larson calls these ‘another clue to the differing ways in which culture shapes our interpretations of literature’ (p. 77). Likewise, passionate romantic love is an overwhelmingly complex phenomenon to religious Iranian Muslims. A clarification should be made first that by ‘religious’ I mean the observant believers, who should not be mistaken for the political Muslim stereotype with fundamental and extremist ideologies. (This group of observant Iranians will be described thoroughly later in this introduction.)

Just as the research component of this thesis deals with the challenges of writing such fiction, its accompanying novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*, is intended to approach the challenges of handling passionate love in the lives of Muslim Iranians for whom falling in love, as well as staying in love, is an intricate and extraordinary occurrence and process to deal with, taking into account their spiritual relations with God, belief in the afterlife, and fear of sinning. It tackles passion and piety in building a poignant romance without resorting to any pre-marital physical intimacy. With its purely fictional narrative, this romance novel is meant to shed light on how terrestrial romantic love influences the lives of these people who are deemed to have strong spiritual connections with the deity, and how it affects familial bonds and relationships in the collective and patriarchal context of contemporary Iran. How does one, for instance, make a connection between the spiritual bond with God and the earthly passionate soulmate type of love with a mortal individual? How far will an individual go for either one? And which one will be chosen over the other? Or how are these bonds formed and strengthened to help reach sublimity according to the principles common in all religions? I aimed to write a creative piece that could address these issues which, to the best of my knowledge and according to my research for this thesis, have not been examined in other works of writing before.

*Yousef's Sooreh* is a romance, yet with two layers of earthly and spiritual love intertwined. It is on the surface a love journey, while on a deeper level it is a spiritual/religious journey of the soul. In fact it is just as much a journey of earthly love as it is a journey of spiritual love, and not just for the heroine but for

most other major characters in the story as well. Love conquers all, but in this romance the triumph of passionate earthly love is made possible by the sublime divine love towards God. This victory is directly linked to the protagonists' high ethical values and moral standards which are all deeply interconnected with their strong faith in God, and consequently this proximity to God bestows upon them miraculous reinforcements in times of desperation. Seeking proximity to God by maintaining virtuousness always takes utmost priority in this novel, while in turn, it is the unseen higher powers from the Almighty that make the impossible unification of the lovers possible. As such, the ending has a twofold gratification – righteousness is also well rewarded. Since the main focus of the story and the driving force of the heroine are her love for the Almighty and her religious beliefs, these characteristics situate *Yousef's Sooreh* within the category of Islamic inspirational romance alongside other (Christian) inspirational fiction. The creative component of this dissertation is therefore the basis for a Muslim inspirational romance as well as the subgenre of spiritual, chaste, or sweet romance in terms of context and the contribution it makes to popular literary English writing.

Correspondingly, to elaborate more on the characters' inner and private lives, the plots in this romance are not merely shaped on the bases of contemporary Iran's political upheavals but also on domestic interpersonal interactions. Indeed, it would be impossible to place a story in isolation without any interference from societal influences. Edward Said (1993) has this to say about the novel as a literary art form: '[it] is an incorporative, quasi-encyclopedic cultural form. Packed into it are both a highly regulated plot mechanism and an entire system of social reference that depends on the existing institutions of bourgeois society, their authority and power' (p. 71). The major forces which move the narrative forward in *Yousef's Sooreh* are the complexity of Iranian society, on the one hand, and the complexity of the relationships between male and female characters of the Muslim faith, on the other. It does not pose an exclusive, one-sided perspective to forbidden love within a greatly turbulent and forbidding Islamic nation. This story not only deals with the outside cultural, social, and political barriers in the love journey of its protagonists, but also with the inner crises of Muslim Iranians, their relationship with God, their romantic

relationship with one another, as well as their familial bonds, rapports, and affinities with relatives and other people in a community with its own cultural specificities, and more importantly its patriarchal and collectivistic structure.

## Research methodology

The research design used for this qualitative research is hermeneutics and textual analysis of narrative texts with the most similarity to the accompanying novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*. The primary sources closely analysed in this study comprise mostly contemporary Iranian novels, as well as a few non-fiction narratives (memoirs and autobiographies) set in Iran, and also a small number of similar non-Iranian fictions set in countries like Pakistan whose social, political, and religious identities have the most resemblance to those of Iran's. Some of the primary sources will be referred to and examined in greater detail while some will only be discussed briefly. The former (Iranian) group chosen for this study constitutes the following prominent works of Iranian fiction and non-fiction: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi (a memoir published in the USA in 2003), *Iran Awakening* by Shirin Ebadi and Azadeh Moaveni<sup>3</sup> (another memoir published in the USA in 2006), *In the Walled Gardens* by Anahita Firouz (a love story published in the USA in 2002), *Rooftops of Tehran* by Mahbod Seraji (a love story published in the USA in 2009), *The Fortune Catcher* by Susanne Pari (a romance published in the USA in 1997), *The New Angel* by Ali Alizadeh (a love story published in Australia in 2008), *The Saffron Kitchen* by Yasmin Crowther (a love story published in the UK in 2006), *The Blood of Flowers* by Anita Amirrezvani (a historical love story published in the USA in 2007), to name the main ones. The latter group constitutes *Trespassing* by Uzma Aslam Khan (a Pakistani love story published in the UK in 2003), and *Maps for Lost Lovers* by Nadeem Aslam (a novel published in the UK in 2004). There are also frequent references to *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (published in the USA in 2009), which is a translation of a Persian romance novel titled *Sansoore Yek Dastane Asheghaneye Irani* by Shahriar Mandanipour, a well-established Iranian fiction writer who resorted to different subtle techniques in crafting his love stories to

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<sup>3</sup> This book is Shirin Ebadi's story written in collaboration with Azadeh Moaveni, and henceforth in this dissertation, it will be referred to as Ebadi's work.

pass through the strict filter of censorship in post-revolutionary Iran. Ali Alizadeh's other book, *Iran: My Grandfather* (published in Australia in 2010), which is a non-fiction historical biography, will also be included in this list, so as to delineate the similarities and differences of the strategies put to use by the same author across genres. These cross-cultural texts are evaluated and examined not on the basis of the author's ethnicity and characteristics but rather the quality of the texts and their themes.

The methodology chosen for this research necessitated analysis of a number of acclaimed and well-known cross-cultural books which could be a perfect – or a semi-identical – match to the romance novel I was aiming to write for this dissertation. In other words, my source texts had to be fiction, set in Iran, have Persian-speaking, Iranian Muslim characters, and also had to be romance novels written in English. Since there was no other such book that could resemble *Yousef's Sooreh* in its entirety, I had to select the closest ones possible. In addition to a few Iranian romances in English, Uzma Aslam Khan's novel *Trespassing* (2003) was among my top choices since Pakistan is also an Islamic republic, and culturally and religiously, the Muslim society of Pakistan is a very close match to that of Iran in the chosen timeframe of 1979 to 1980. The same is true of Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lover* (2004), which is set in a religious Pakistani community in diaspora with near identical cultural and religious beliefs to that of Iran. My selection of two Persian memoirs (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *Iran Awakening*) was based on the fact that not only were they bestsellers but they were also equipped with everything else I needed about Persian-speaking Iranians and Muslims; as such, except for their being non-fiction in nature, they were two of the best source guides I could have access to within the literature of Iranian diaspora.

Substantial reading and analysis of previous cross-cultural corpora (particularly the abovementioned sources) is done to examine the challenges and difficulties that cross-cultural writers might have faced in their writing journeys, the strategies they have used, whether these strategies were productive or counter-productive, and the kind of critical feedback they received on their writing. Theory and practice are interlocked in this research. While the challenges

are identified and explored in the theoretical component of this thesis, along with ways to deal with them, they are instantiated and exemplified in the creative exegesis of this thesis, which serves as a practical road map to further illustrate and contextualise the points covered in this study.

## **Research question and theoretical framework**

This study attempts to answer the following question. What are the challenges of writing cross-cultural Persian fiction in the romance genre set in contemporary Iran and written in the English language?

This research is situated within a number of interdisciplinary domains, and as such I approach the issues of writing cross-cultural romance fiction through a number of literary prisms, most dominant of which is broad postcolonial theory. In a narrower, more specific sense, the academic area and theoretical framework my research draws on to explore the issues of this research fits into diaspora/migrant literature, contemporary women's/feminist literature, translation/linguistic studies, and popular-fiction/literary romance genre, in the contemporary postcolonial era. It is vital to make a distinction, however, between linguistic and cultural translation. In this dissertation I only draw on translation studies in formulating my discussion about cross-cultural diasporic writing, with the aim of discussing the function of these translation issues in creative writing. The research and accompany novel that comprise this dissertation deal primarily with cultural translation for a Western readership, rather than linguistic translation into English. Although some linguistic translation is inevitable in transforming Persian culture into a text enacted in English, in-depth exploration of linguistic translation is outside the scope of this research.

Under the general domain of postcolonial theory, a few relevant sub-branches are drawn upon. The concept of 'utopia' plays a central role in this work. It is both identifiable in the mere act of migration: leaving one's homeland in hope of a better future; and also a major theme in the novel: creating a love-bond that will lead the lovers to eternal unification and make the homeland a better place for them and their compatriots. That is why postcolonial utopian

theory also has a part in the conceptual paradigms of this thesis, as it is in the dream and aspiration for a transformable world that many migrant writings, including love stories, take place. Iranian migrant writers' works fit into the category of a broader area of diasporic English literature and hence they share common features with the other migrant writings of non-Iranian writers. This enables existing theories of hybridity to be applied to the works analysed for this study. Ashcroft (2007) refers to the direct relevance of utopian theory to hybrid migrant writing (the writing products possessing and presenting more than one nation's specific cultural entities) by stating that 'it is by narrative, by the stories we tell, that we have a world and it is by utopian thinking, utopian forms, utopian narrative, that we have a conception of a radically changeable world' (p. 418). Ashcroft's other book, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (2016), needs to be acknowledged here as well.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi's (2003) attempt to resort to art and literature, not as 'a luxury but a necessity' (p. 28), is directly linked to her utopian thinking. Her use of American classic novels as a survival kit for her group of female students is her way of creating a utopia for those she can witness suffocating in authoritarian Iran. Looking from a different angle, Iranian diasporic literature has migration as one of its main pillars of foundation, without which no such literature would come to existence. Therefore, since anything related to exile, diaspora, refuge, and migration has in its core the dream and desire to reach a better future, then any cross-cultural writing or research of this sort – including this dissertation – deals with the utopian conceptual framework one way or another. *Yousef's Sooreh* – or any love story for that matter – is no exception to this. The hope and dream of being loved and finding that companion whose courtship and union can bring the protagonist a more fulfilled future, and working in the pursuit of reaching that someone and that kind of relationship, are undeniable in any romance, marking any love story a utopian literary work.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I need to acknowledge the existence of 'sacred theory' in the contemporary context, because this work, and especially its creative component, is inter-connected with Islamic faith. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2006) put it, 'the sacred remains the field of post-colonial studies in most need of critical and scholarly attention' (p. 7).

## **Statement of problem, gap, and significance of this research**

Although an abundant diasporic/migratory Iranian literature has emerged within the second half of the twentieth century and onward, there has been not much creative writing done in contemporary, post-revolutionary Iran of the type of fiction I present in this study. My survey of literature substantiates my hypothesis about the lack of such romance fiction, and I also present evidence of cultural, political and economic reasons for this gap.

The significant gap I am hoping this work and its accompanying novel will fill in cross-cultural creative writing and cross-cultural research literature, first is the rarely touched area of pure fictional romance in an entirely Iranian context with Persian characters and sacred elements, written in English. The second gap is the untouched area of research in discovering and solving the challenges of writing such a cross-cultural work in English. There has been abundant research done on translation along with its widely-known methods and techniques, but not in the area of composing a hybrid text of this specific type. The literature review also confirms that there is a lack in the existence of any Persian romance fiction that explores the lives of those Persian Muslims with ancient ancestral religious background (explained below in Group D as ‘true Muslims’) – the anti-stereotype Iranian Muslims for whom romantic love brings about different life-changing experiences worthy of investigation. Moreover, this dissertation aims to insert new knowledge about religion in a field of literary studies and creative writing in English, where such explorations of these particular, delineated religious practices from a positive standpoint is largely absent.

## **Muslim heterogeneity in Iran**

I need to first elaborate on the heterogeneity of the Muslim population currently residing in Iran, categorise them into groups, and define the particular population of Muslims on whom the creative component of this research focuses. Religion, spirituality, and Islam are such intricate and puzzling phenomena in Iran that every Iranian’s perception of and affiliation with deity and divinity can actually give a nuanced definition to these terms, making them even more perplexing if perceived and examined by a foreigner from outside Iranian borders. As Grassian

(2013) states, ‘exploring Iran and its diasporic community is especially important since [the] Western public generally misperceives Iran and Iranian demographics’ (p. 2). While possessing a wide diversity in its ethnicity, culture, and religion, Iran has been the subject of misunderstanding, generalisation, and stereotyping by the Western public and the media which have wrongly grouped it as a homogeneous Muslim nation, similar to its neighbouring Middle Eastern Arab countries (Moallem, 1999; Tenty & Houston, 2013). ‘Conventional Western or American views of Iran tend to be less than idyllic and are often the result of generalisations and stereotypes’ (Grassian, 2013, p. 7). In her edited book, *My sister, guard your veil; my brother, guard your eyes: Uncensored Iranian voices* (published in the USA in 2006), Lila Azam Zanganeh, along with her co-authors, has made a valuable attempt to clarify these misunderstandings and explaining why Iran’s diverse culture, ethnicity, religion, ethnography, and hybridity do not allow for a straightforward homogeneous stereotypical categorisation into previous dichotomies preset by the West. These authors strongly believe that this Middle Eastern framework does not suit Iran.

Most Iranian diasporic authors and especially the ones under study in this research, such as Nafisi and Ebadi, have been unanimous in acknowledging that they have nothing against any religion but the crimes politicians commit in the name of religion. Nafisi (2003), for instance, does not reject Islam or any faith but believes in keeping the church separate from the state and opposes the misuse of Islam by politicians. She states that ‘[t]he Islamic Revolution, as it turned out, did more damage to Islam by using it as an instrument of oppression than any alien ever could have done’ (p. 132). Grassian (2013) also confirms that ‘it is not Islam that Nafisi indicts, but a perceived vicious political totalitarianism she believes to exist in Iran’ (p. 106).

The pre-revolution Iran was home to believers of different faiths, and even though most Iranians were Shi’a Muslims, religious minorities, even atheists and secularists, all lived together in peace and harmony. After the 1979 Revolution, religion was no longer an inner personal entity but a social commodity, to which a new political dimension was assigned by the new Islamic Republic. As Gashtili (2013) states ‘in a country like Iran, Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual

choice, but it is a political system’ (p. 135). About Iran’s current theocratic structure she adds that ‘religion is not just an individual’s choice, but it has entered into every social and political aspect of citizens’ lives—Muslim and otherwise—due to its entanglement with state power’ (p. 135). To me, having lived in Iran for a total of thirty-three years, the phenomenon of revolution has led to the production of several new types of Muslims who until then were non-existent. Current Iranian Muslims (both Shi’as and Sunnis) who make up over 99 percent of the Iranian population comprise four different categories – and by Muslim I mean their external official religious affiliation in the society: (A) nominal Muslims, (B) converted Muslims, (C) political Muslims, (D) true Muslims.

***Group A: nominal Muslims***

**This group consists of Iranians who are born into Muslim families but do not believe in Islam, nor do they practise it.** These Iranians merely call themselves Muslim in official and social settings because public renouncement of Islam is forbidden in Iran. Reza Aslan (2006) also believes that most Iranians do not adhere to religion and are actually not such devout followers of any religions compared to people in their neighbouring countries. As such, it is unequivocal that among the members of this group, those who flee the country and become migrants have a high rate of conversion to other religions or becoming atheist or secularists abroad. In their article ‘The Iranian diaspora in Sydney: Migration experience of recent Iranian immigrants’, Tenty and Houston (2013) explain how different the Iranian migrant community is compared to that of Iran’s neighbouring countries in all aspects, including ethnicity, culture, and religion. They further report that, according to statistics, ‘only 32.5 percent of Iranians in Australia are Muslim, the remainder recorded as 27.1 percent “other religions” with around one fifth (20.8 percent) recorded as Christian’, whereas 99 percent of Turkish migrants – who come from one of Iran’s neighbouring countries – kept their Islamic faith after migration (p. 636).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> However, presuming to give in-depth validity to these statistical figures and making inferences on the basis of their credibility would be imprudent, as migrants might be disinclined to declare their true religious affiliations in the questionnaires.

***Group B: converted Muslims***

**This group consists of former members of religious minorities such as Jews, Christians, Baha'is, and other faiths who have converted to Islam** due to the pressures and hardships they face living in Islamic authoritarian Iran. This takes into account the fact that – as Iranian writer, Hakakian (2004) states in her notable memoir *Journey from the Land of No* (published in the USA) – before the revolution Iran had the second-largest Jewish population after Israel in the Middle East, and the largest among any neighbouring Muslim country. Jaspal (2016) confirms this and further adds that ‘up to a quarter of a million Israelis claim to have some Persian ancestry’ (p. 424). Yet, Baha'is were the most populated religious minorities in the pre-revolutionary Iran of the 1970s (Amani, 1970).

***Group C: political Muslims***

**Muslims who have connections, either through work or family, with the authorities in the regime.** Members of this group are linked with the leader, ayatollahs, mullahs, members of the parliament, Revolutionary Guards (Sepah), Iran's voluntary militia (Baseej), or other administrators of the government. These Muslims, regardless of their true inner faith or feelings about the regime, have strict obligations to demonstrate the highest levels of loyalty to the government, even though the majority of the Iranian population is not in favour of the Islamic Republic and its rulers. ‘Iranian rulers’, according to Hakakian (2004), were ‘neither just to nor loved by their own people’ (p. 11). They are therefore mandated to represent themselves as the most religious and devoted Muslims in order to keep their ties with the government body and maintain their social stability and status. This false social mask is a learnt self-censorship which is discussed in later chapters of this dissertation – a small price to pay in return for great welfare, limitless priorities and comfortable living in a country where most people live below the poverty line and are subject to abuse and deprivation of many human rights.

***Group D: true Muslims***

**These Muslims have for generations been born and raised in religious Muslim families** and lived a decent life among members of other Iranian ethnic

and religious groups in peace, harmony, and friendship, both before and after the revolution. Their faith is still, *to them*, an inner link between themselves and God, a guide to being good, and doing good deeds for others. Their spirituality has not become tainted by politics, nor does it become a means to achieve terrestrial worldly pleasures. It does not make them advocates of a government which, as Reza Aslan (2006) puts it, ‘is neither Islamic nor a republic. It can be described neither as a theocracy nor as a democracy. [But rather] ... a “mullahcracy,” a bizarre hybrid of religious and third world fascism’ (p. 29). Members of this latter group have maintained their ancient Muslim identity and continued observing their faith throughout both the pre- and post-revolutionary eras regardless of all the political reformations the country has gone through within the past century. They have embraced modernity while keeping their traditional and religious roots. They were just as much jolted and resentful when Reza Shah took the veils off women in public in 1920, as they were when wearing the veil was forced upon women shortly after the 1979 Revolution against their will, as the true Islam, they believe, has never forced religion or its practice on people. ‘*La ikraha fiddeen*’ (‘There is no compulsion in religion’) (Qur’an, 2:256)<sup>6</sup>. For this group, religion did not become a new entity; it remained what it always has been.

An acknowledgement of overlap and nuance is needed here, as the above categorisation is by no means indicative of assigning clear-cut boundaries between these groups. Muslim converts can be true Muslims too, for example, or nominal Muslims can still lead decent lives. However, Group D (true Muslims) is the focus of this dissertation. Members of this group have had their own particular hidden sufferings which were never dealt with or brought to light in a country where the majority makes up Groups A and B. In most cases, because of this group’s similar outside appearance to those of the third group (political Muslims) – and this is by no means making a correlation between religious appearance and proximity to God, nobility, and righteousness – these Muslims have been unjustly judged and treated with harsh criticism and hatred by their fellow Iranians who are against the government as well as its political Muslims.

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<sup>6</sup> In this research, the translation of the Arabic texts is my own work. Because of the shared Muslim faith with Arabs, Iranian Persian speakers have basic knowledge of the Arabic language, particularly the contents of the Qur’an. They also learn it as a second language in middle school. Moreover, the majority of Iranians living in Iran’s southern and southwestern provinces, situated in the vicinity of the neighbouring Arab countries, are Persian-Arabic bilinguals.

They have been ignored, isolated, and outcast by other Iranians, and often considered as spies, traitors, informers, and renegades. These true Muslims are not seen for what they really are inside but how they appear outside in the eyes of the public to whom religious attire and appearance nowadays means nothing but treachery and hypocrisy. They are mistaken for people who have ties with the regime, something common Iranians since the beginning of the revolution have learned to hate.

It is true that this particular group of Muslims may not encounter the typical hardships the majority of Iranians (Groups A and B) living in Iran would, such as being stopped and harassed by the Revolutionary Guards or the disciplinary forces of the Baseej, for their way of clothing and appearance or for drinking or encounters with the members of the opposite sex in public (see, for example, Asayesh, 1999; Bahrampour, 1999; Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006; Hakakian, 2004; Moaveni, 2005; and Nafisi, 2003). Yet the true Muslims have their own pains and sufferings, such as having lost the love, friendship, trust, and companionship their older generations once shared with the members of other groups of Iranians, and more importantly seeing their religion become misrepresented and misused by the government and witnessing some of the worst possible treatments of humankind being practised on others in the religion's name. To them this is a heavy loss and a hefty price they have had to pay for being true believers of Islam in post-revolutionary Iran while being totally unacknowledged and unrecognised as an existing category of Iranian Muslims by the outside world.

There is research that supports this observation. As noted by Rehimy (1994), 'passive trends have prevailed among the Shi'a for a long time' (p. 2). Depending on the cleric each Muslim adheres to for religious advice, some Shi'a Muslims are encouraged to take an active part in the politics; whereas others are advised to take a more peaceful and lenient approach by keeping the mosque and the government separate, so to speak (Rehimy, 1994). Unlike the political Muslims of Iran who for long have made headlines by supporting the government, the latter have been left aside in a state of quiet segregation since they could not be induced to join the group of hardliners. In fact, members of this group of Shi'as still maintain their democratic traditional religiosity, which is a compatible, flexible,

and open-minded Islam. However, this compatibility is not in line with the objectives of the authoritarian government and as such it is followed in a more reserved, undemonstrative way. Many religious scholars, including Moghaddam (2016) confirm this by acknowledging the ‘prodemocracy features of Shia Islam, which’ is believed ‘might have served as a foundation for a more democratic Iran’ (p. 42). However, ‘after 1979, the multivoiced nature of shia Islam was squashed by the politically installed supreme leader, who demands absolute obedience’ (p. 42). Moghaddam (2016) and other religious scholars discuss certain ‘aspects of traditional shia Islam’ and believe that ‘these open traditions were stamped out when political mullahs took power and reestablished a dictatorship in Iran’ (p. 44). The true Shi’a Muslims with prerevolutionary democratic beliefs still maintained the genuine Muslimhood they have always had, but because of their opposing ideologies in practicing a nuanced version of the Shi’a Islam they are not brought into the spotlight. John Esposito (2011) puts forth a similar argument by stressing the significant democratic aspects of traditional Islamic rules as well as their compatibility and adjustability to make a genuine democracy. This is another reason why the true Shi’a Muslims have taken a rather yielding and reticent manner about their faith in the current Iran and why they have been kept away and disregarded.

My novel primarily relates to members of this group of true Muslim Iranians who are believed to be non-existent, and whose lives have been left unexplored by researchers and unexposed to media and writers. As such, I believe acknowledging their existence and bringing them to light will fill a significant gap in the contemporary Iranian migrant literature. Moreover, as explained in the previous section ‘Purpose of this study’, to the members of this group, passionate love has a nuanced meaning and brings about a whole different experience with its own specific challenges different to that of other Iranians – which further confirms the heterogeneity of Iranian Muslims residing in Iran. Iranian writers have so far numerously confirmed the existence of the first three groups of Muslim Iranians and extensively written about them in their fiction and non-fiction, but as far as the literature shows, they have not identified the last group or written about them as an existing population of Muslims in Iran. Therefore, *Yousef’s Sooreh*, as a romance addressing this particular group of Muslims,

reflects certain issues, hurdles, and dilemmas that other Iranian cross-cultural love stories have not dealt with, and hence explores an area in the literature that has hardly been touched before.

### **Post-revolutionary disillusionment and diasporic literature**

After lengthy eras of tyranny, oppression, and censorship, both by the deposed Shah and the current Iranian government, Iranian writers became the means of keeping the world informed about a nation that no other media had access to, especially prior to the 1990s when the internet had not yet come into existence, at least not in Iran. Many authors wrote merely to reveal to the world the horrifying things that were happening in Iran. From the 1950s onward, writers in diaspora – particularly Iranian writers of memoir who had personal life experience of such traumatic events – have been including these shocking subjects as themes in their writing. Fotouhi (2012) argues that ‘because of its intimate nature, the memoir promises first hand experiences from spaces that were previously inaccessible to Western readers’ (p. 126). Although there might be other incentives and reasons for the composition of memoirs, the majority of the memoirs I have surveyed in this study were politically charged and shared the same themes: totalitarianism, deprivation of human rights, intolerable living conditions in post-revolutionary Iran, exploitation, discrimination, migration, exile, and nostalgia.

Notwithstanding, they all possess their own exclusive merits and aesthetics as well. Grassian (2013) confirms that ‘a significant amount of Iranian diasporic literature and Iranian literature translated into English tends to be in the form of fiction and memoirs’ (p. 3). And by far, memoir has been the most preferred and common genre chosen by these authors, especially Iranian women writers whose productivity in diasporic migrant writing has been notable. Fotouhi states that ‘despite the handful of books published by Iranian men over the last few decades, however, they have not received nearly as much interest or exposure as Iranian women writers’ (2012, p. 200). Most Iranian female writers who have been massively acclaimed for their great contributions to the feminist movement and literature of diaspora, have used the memoir form as a tool to reveal political crimes and announce public opposition to the hardships and sufferings of all

Iranian civilians in their home country. The most famous pioneers are Azar Nafisi, Shirin Ebadi, Azadeh Moaveni, and Marjaneh Satrapi, to name a few.

*Iran Awakening* – a text already referred to in this chapter – is one such memoir written by the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi, with the assistance of Azadeh Moaveni, an acclaimed Iranian writer herself. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi – likewise already mentioned – is another one of the most prominent and globally acclaimed works in the genre of non-fiction. It is an Iranian university teacher's memories and observations of a group of her Iranian students narrating their life stories during private, non-academic gatherings at her home. Among her other skills in this memoir is her brilliance in building a bridge that links their lives to those of the main characters in a few classic English novels – namely, *Lolita* (1955), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Daisy Miller* (1879), and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) – the novels she yearned for but was forbidden to teach in her university classes of English literature, before she permanently migrated to the West. It is also a memoir which 'has outstripped others in terms of commercial success' (Grassian, 2013, p. 88), attracting a wide readership.

Nonetheless, there are other – although very few in number – cross-cultural memoirs in which sociopolitical issues are not the author's main focus. Kamin Mohammadi's *The Cypress Tree* (published in the UK in 2011), for example, is a rare work of its type in the sense that it does not carry political themes to the same extent as in most memoirs and is mostly focused on Iranian culture, family, and the ancient traditions of Persia, all of which I have, hopefully, represented in my novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*. In an interview on the Tehran Bureau website, Mohammadi states:

I wanted to provide a little balance to the books that normally get published about Iran, which tell of jailings, beatings, brutality, and ignorance -- this is just a little (although terrible) part of life in Iran, and I tried to paint a truer and richer picture of my country and our modern history. (Mohammadi, 2011)

*Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* by Fatemeh Keshavarz (published in the USA in 2007) also breaches the standard Iranian memoir norms in its own unique way. It is a corrective response to Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and therefore does not follow the usual themes prevalent in most other memoirs set in Iran. This book is Keshavarz's critique of the best-seller, a counter-narrative to Nafisi's portrayal of Iran in her memoir which to Keshavarz is a 'New Orientalist' text with an inaccurate and not-so-multidimensional depiction of Iran's labyrinthine and multifaceted social structure in the contemporary modern age. She believes that the 'New Orientalism' is the more recently emerging Orientalism, a new-fashioned way with which the deprived Islamic nations are treated by their old opponent: the West (Keshavarz, 2007).

In an interview Keshavarz states that '*Jasmine [and] Stars* blends personal memoir with literary/social commentary on present day Iran ... On a different level, *Jasmine [and] Stars* is a counter perspective to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*' (2007b). As Edward Said (1993) puts it, 'each text has its own particular genius, as does each geographical region of the world, with its own overlapping experiences and interdependent histories of conflict' (p. 67). It would be wrong to think 'that traditional societies do not have much to offer', and that '[the West has] an unquestioned right to change them into pale imitations of [itself]'. Instead of seeing Westernisation as the only salvation for Iran, as Nafisi's book postulates, one should accept and embrace a country like the current Iran as an 'exciting treasure house of diversity and difference' while at the same time noting its existing anti-republic government (Keshavarz, 2007b). She also warns readers about the seriousness of the New Orientalist texts by saying 'they frequently reduce the Orient to a dark and violent environment ripe for military intrusion'. Regardless of their authors' intentions, these texts 'simplify and dehumanize entire constellations of cultures and transform them into easy and "legitimate" targets' (Keshavarz, 2007b). Along the same lines, Maira (2009) also portrays Nafisi's perspective on multi-culturalism, and considers her a neoconservative who directly rejects Edward Said's work on Orientalism.

Diasporic migrant literature (including literary fiction, genre fiction, and non-fiction) is saturated with a rich profusion of contemporary works on the social aspect of Iranians' lives inside Iran, portraying similar themes: oppression, tyranny, exploitation of the weak, fight for power, Muslim women's submission and subordination, censorship, etc. Moreover, in addition to the prevalent memoirs, many prominent Iranian fiction writers too, within their love stories published in the West, provide a complete and thorough account of the political and social climates of Iran down to minute details.<sup>7</sup> These novels demonstrate more or less the genre characteristics of the literary romance genre, but are not necessarily framed as romance in terms of satisfying all of the generic markers outlined by Pamela Regis. They are also set in Iranian or similar cultural contexts and are positioned for an English-speaking readership. This enhances their contributions as cross-cultural texts in relation to this thesis research. In an interview about Mahbod Seraji's *Rooftops of Tehran*, a romance novel set in pre-revolutionary Iran, the author states that '[it] is intended for anyone interested in Iran and its culture, traditions, and politics' (Seraji, 2009b). He then goes on to say that 'it's also a touching love story' (2009b). Like most others, this romance is clearly and intentionally set in cultural and political contexts. His mention of the 'love story' is preceded by his declaration of other attributes of the novel and particularly 'politics'. Seemingly, the central focus of the story is not intended to be the passionate relationship between the main characters, but other social phenomena. Also, according to its author, the novel is not entirely based on pure imagination. There are some plots in the narrative that are based on real events that the author witnessed in Iran (Seraji, 2009b).

In much the same way, in Alizadeh's *The New Angel*, the author narrates a love story in Iran while at the same time presenting a full picture of the impact of the Islamic Revolution on people's lives and what post-revolutionary Iran looks like, particularly to young school-age children and teenagers, the specific stage of life for the protagonist at that time. Bahram, the main protagonist, has this to say about the antagonist, his Cousin Abbas who has become an extremist Revolutionary Guard and is giving a speech at Bahram's school:

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<sup>7</sup> The following novels are discussed more thoroughly in other chapters in respect to the writing strategies used and are then compared to the ones used in *Yousef's Sooreh*.

And then, with a swift gesture of his right hand, Abbas brought the blood-curdling invocation to its end, and spoke eloquently into the microphone: “You are not students anymore. You are all martyrs of Allah. Your pens are rifles. Your ink is the blood of your veins. You will learn how to fight global imperialism.” ... I had by now overcome my initial admiration for my brave cousin, and felt nothing but fear, an absolute fear of what my cousin was capable of doing. (Alizadeh, 2008, pp. 62–63)

It is tangible in this excerpt, how most writers of diaspora reflect their life experiences in their writings, even in their fiction work, such as Alizadeh has in his novel. These background experiences, in spite of being bitterly painful by having roots in Iran in the years of post-revolution, tend to subconsciously find a way of coming to the surface and make up a vital part of this story. In Alizadeh’s case, only three years old at the onset of revolution and fifteen when he migrated to Australia in 1991, the author has only lived the hardships any Iranian child and teenager would in post-revolution Iran. That is why the protagonist, Bahram, he portrays in his love story has a chronology almost identical to the author’s own life events both in Iran and in Australia, which is what the author can best relate to and identify with. This might also be one reason why in his novel Alizadeh focuses more on how children and teenagers are brainwashed, and their innocent minds are fed with things they cannot and should not process, in order to produce obedient future soldiers for the revolution, just like Cousin Abbas and his metamorphosis into a demon. Some other Iranian writers also confirm the same form of child abuse in post-revolutionary Iran (see, for example, Nafisi, 2003; Satrapi, 2000/2003). While Alizadeh only scratches the surface of the adversities most adults have confronted during that time span, he presents an elaborate narration of the loss of childhood and early adolescence in the 1980s and early 1990s Iran.

In more or less a similar way, the societal controlling factors are so dominant in Anahita Firouz’s *In the Walled Gardens* (published in the USA in 2002) that there is no feasible or visible end to the love story, which is consequently left incomplete. In an interview Firouz admits: ‘As I wrote the novel, it occurred to me that love and politics are eventually fused – something that readers pick up and often find interesting’ (Firouz, 2003, p. 1). The

protagonists, Mahastee and Reza, give up on their love and go their different ways as they find themselves too submerged and trapped by opposite forces in the pre-revolutionary Iran of the 1970s to be able to follow their hearts. Mahastee, the female protagonist, shares her views on why they could not make the romantic relationship work:

He [Reza] was forced to carry his politics [Left] ... He lived with this and hid it well because it was so much a part of him. I could see why now. It kept him passionate, alive, rooted. It kept him from me. Our fate could not be rewritten; it was not ours anymore. We were on either side of a divide, he and I. I represented the status quo, what he fought against, what accorded him dishonor and betrayal for thinking and doing as he did. Each of our lives negating the other's existence, the divide between us an eternal form of contempt. So many things between us. I considered them, my life and his. (Firouz, 2002, p. 291)

This is an example of a love story where love does not conquer all. The story's ending is intentionally left open just like the future the protagonists foresee with one another.

In Susanne Pari's *The Fortune Catcher* (published in the USA in 1997) the love story originated before the revolution in the 1970s when Layla and Dariush are children in Iran, and continues into the 1980s after the revolution. The protagonists, already in a romantic relationship in New York, make a fatal mistake in returning to post-revolutionary Iran upon the traitorous insistence of their back-stabbing relatives and friends, who separate the lovers the day after their secret wedding in Tehran, sending Dariush to the deadly front-line of war, and Layla to imprisonment and torture by the government militia. This is how Layla sees the new Tehran, not long after her arrival:

Three years since the Shah had been deposed, almost a year since the American embassy hostages had been freed, and still the Revolution oozed like an infected wound. The theocracy clung to power by a turban thread, fighting opponents with the Shah's confiscated guns and culling devotees with their misuse of religious law. One thing was for sure: They had a knack for propaganda. (Pari, 1997, p. 21)

The new dreadful Tehran is nothing like the hometown Layla remembers from years before the revolution, a sight she wishes she had not seen. This is right before she is arrested and tortured in her own family home, which is now confiscated and used as a government base. Similar to how Bahram (in *The New Angel*) recounts the process of Iran's young generations being brainwashed by some revolutionary fanatic hardliners, Layla too delineates the regime's expertise in using propaganda by all possible means to persuade the naïve minds of the common people, as well as punishing and torturing those who cannot be convinced and fooled by their slogans. This again shows similar themes prevalent in other novels under study here. It proves how deeply the context of post-revolutionary Iran has influenced the novel and involved the characters with the politics of the time. The same background informs *Yousef's Sooreh*, yet to a lesser degree, leaving enough room for other internal, more personal dimensions of faith and spirituality to influence the narrative.

These excerpts are only samples of numerous other similar references authors have made in these novels to social disasters and tribulations. These love stories transfer the climate of the pre- and post-revolutionary Iran extremely effectively since the dominant themes of the plots and subplots are sociological issues of the time. *Yousef's Sooreh* has an additional focus. The conflict is not only caused by the evils of the outside world but also rooted within the characters themselves and is directed by their unique personalities, beliefs, ideologies, and perspectives of life. Despite the intensity of the love bond between the lovers, Soo and Joe are in many ways at the end of two extremes in terms of their distinct personalities and intricacies, especially at the beginning of the novel. Hence, they are not a near-perfect harmonious couple who at the same time would be fighting the external demons. In most other fictions of its type, normally this is the driving force of the plot: two lovers as a unified team against the antagonist(s). Bahram and Fereshteh (in *The New Angel*) make an unsuccessful attempt to flee Iran in the hope of finding freedom elsewhere. Mahastee and Reza (in *In the Walled Gardens*) attempt to start a love affair as their rekindled love instantly rises from the ashes of their lost past, and strengthens their defiance to break away from their present chaotic life, even though they are defeated at the end. Likewise, Pasha and Zari (in *Rooftops of Tehran*) must succumb to a lengthy separation

until they find enough safety in Iran to reunite and build a life together. Layla and Dariush (in *The Fortune Catcher*) nearly lose their marriage and their lives as they fall into a deceptive trap set by some close relatives and friends as well as the post-revolutionary government, all united against them.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, it is not merely the others that create the conflict in the love journey; it is also the substantial nuances in the lovers' personal attributes. Joe often comes on too strong and is abrasive and crude. However, this is done intentionally and for two reasons. First, it serves the creation of suspense as well as conflict and tension in the narrative. I did not intend to have a perfect male figure, an obvious good choice for the hero required for this romance novel (with all puppies and rainbows) right from the very beginning. I needed this character to have certain off-putting and repellent aspects for the creation of this suspense and tension, and to make his union with the heroine utterly impossible at first. Second, I then meant for the power of love to make him undergo certain transformations. This is in fact one of the feministic aspects of this romance novel.

Joe is a complex character in that his static characterisation is only well-recognised towards the end of the novel. He is intentionally written in a way to be – or appear to be – the opposite of the Rustins, and he does look like that at the onset of the novel when his true personality is not yet revealed. And the old animosity between him and Soo's father facilitates in intensifying this element. It is only after he meets Soo and gets to know her in an indirect way that he starts going through certain gradual transformations over the span of the love journey (a few months), while at the same time his inner personality (the true Joe he already is) starts to unravel itself. These dynamic improvements are made to happen because of the power of love between the hero and the heroine, while the revealing of his true self (e.g., the JANG and his feminist side) is the suspense subplot interwoven with the main romance theme.

Joe's traumatic childhood – losing his mother at infancy, not having a healthy relationship with his father, along with meeting an unusual eight-year-old (Soo) who he believes has saved his life against his will, and then losing her too – is assistive in cause-effect rationalisation of his sudden outbursts and narcissistic

tendencies. These emotional shortcomings also allow him plenty of room for improvement which is what his falling in love with Soo does, and the actualisation of this shows itself in all that he has done for the orphans at the end of the novel. Joe is not – nor is he meant to be – the ideal or symbolic representative of the heroic lover figure reflective of the stereotype in the particular context of this romance. Neither should his characterisation be interpreted as my means to convey the Iranian Muslim population's likes/dislikes of a lover in a passionate, romantic relationship. Joe could have been written in so many other ways with a variety of nuanced merits/demerits. He is merely one of the many possibilities a male protagonist could be. He is the way he is because the fiction writer's freedom as well as taste justifies their choice of the story's elements (such as characterisation and plot).

In contrast to these Iranian novels with many shared narrative features, Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* possesses some different attributes. Regardless of the spectacular coverage of the political and social climate of the civil-war-torn Pakistan of the 1990s, it is mainly the difference in the way the two protagonists feel about love and each other that terminates their love affair before anything else does. In a nuanced way, *Trespassing*'s unique and meticulous approach to love and politics gives it distinctive features of its own. Unlike the ending of the *Rooftops of Tehran* and *The Fortune Catcher* there is no resolution, nor is there a defeat of the antagonist, leading to a happy ending. On the other hand, opposite to what happens in *In the Walled Gardens* and *The New Angel*, it is not just the environmental barriers that keep their love from prospering and conquering all. Similar to what happens in *Yousef's Sooreh*, it is also the static nature of the protagonists that hinders their progress.

Another cross-cultural semi-domestic, semi-romance novel which takes its place within the abovementioned migrant fictions and gives an engaging new perspective to this research is Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen* (published in the UK in 2006). This is a story with a dual background of 1950s Iran, and then 1990s Iran as well as England. It is the portrayal of how the patriarchal dominance and pressures of Iran in the 1950s have immediate, as well as ongoing, impacts on the life of the story's protagonist. This love story has the

most differences from other countertype Persian novels discussed above since it does not recount social and political predicaments of Iran. It has, however, more resemblance to *Trespassing* and *Yousef's Sooreh* for the way the conflict and the resolution are not totally the result of outside forces of the society. Another feature that *The Saffron Kitchen* has in common with *Yousef's Sooreh* is its thematic emphasis on family relations, but with a few differences. One is that *The Saffron Kitchen*'s main focus is not only the element of romance between Maryam and Ali (the story's protagonists) but also just as much the father–daughter relationship in 1950s Iran; the problems of migration, such as the crisis of mixed identity in exile, the nostalgia, the in-betweenness, the clash of cultures, the interracial and hybridity conflicts; and lastly, the mother–daughter relationship.

In light of the prior extensive contemporary works produced by notable Iranian cross-cultural authors, I aimed to compose a creative piece which – in spite of having certain resemblances to the previous writings – would have some nuances as well, one of which would be its coverage of a different population context not previously touched on or explored, in spite of the fact that it fits well into Islamic romance literature. My secondary aim was to write a romance genre text while embracing all its main parameters. Furthermore, current migrant literature shows a gap in an entirely fictional romance that is set in a Muslim Iranian context and based on the not-yet examined effects of love on the characters' inner spiritual beliefs and their relationships, as well as the nuanced and unexpected ways it twists the plots. The devoutness or the spirituality variable as an added factor to the process of passionate earthly love, as well as integrating the religious practice into everyday lives and relationships of the protagonists, leads to certain unpredictable deviations in plot and characterisation which might interest less culturally-aware readers who are not fully familiar with the Iranian context or the Islamic faith. The current stature and status of the so-called Muslim Iranians and the Islamic Republic in the global domain, along with the prevalent misrepresentation of this religion, might be some of the plausible factors why Iranian writers have chosen not to write about the true Islam and this minority of true Shi'a Muslims. Therefore, as explained before, this context

remains untouched and in great need of exploration in the Iranian migrant literature.

### **The impact of the 1979 Revolution in Iran on writing**

The revolution in Iran led to scarcity of material in the romance genre within Iran, regardless of the language. It is believed that if not restrained by marriage and curbed within the boundaries of couples' private households, passionate romantic love – or any other related derivatives to this notion – is the cause of sexual arousal in public and a means to gratification of the carnal instinct in an illegitimate way, which will ultimately lead to social corruption. As such, anything which can be a means to sexual satisfaction outside marriage is strictly forbidden in Islam; hence these books have had no place in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. Consequently, there is a great lack of love stories and romance novels set in contemporary Iran in any language, that can serve as a reference and guide for other writers and as a means of introducing and conveying the Iranian culture to other nations. The government of Iran places serious sanctions on free speech, censoring their media (Mahloujian, 2002; Mandanipour, 2009). In the post-revolution era, the publication or possession of forbidden books is dangerous for writers, readers, booksellers and publishers. Publishers are punished for any books judged critical of the government's policies. Most of what has been written in contemporary Iran during the past four decades revolves around documentaries of revolution and war, biographies, memoirs, and stories related to the Islamic holy figures written in Persian. Any realistic work that would freely reflect the country's turbulence and the nature of the regime – i.e., anti-government and anti-Islamic texts – followed by anything in the genre of romance (both fiction and non-fiction) would take first and second place respectively on the list of unpublishable material in Iran.

Soon after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranians' long-awaited dream for freedom of speech during the pre-revolution era was transformed into another nightmare with the restoration of a new censorship in the 1980s and onward. According to a new 'decree' by the government, as Karimi-Hakkak (1985) puts it, 'in order to print, offset, or mimeograph any book, booklet, periodical, journal, newspaper, pamphlet, tract, or any written statement, a print-house must first

inspect the seal of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance on the paper on which the statement is written' (p. 223). Despite the efforts put forward by the Iranian Writers' Association these laws became even harsher and more restrictive. Once the objections to the imposed censorship continued, the Association became the subject of a violent attack by the Revolutionary Guards during which all its existing documents along with 'membership records, taped proceedings, and its library' were confiscated (Karimi-Hakkak, 1985, p. 225). Some of the Association's main members and founders had to smuggle their texts out of Iranian borders to have them published since they were forbidden to do so inside the country. Momayesi's figures (2000) indicate that about half of the published press – 'newspapers, magazines, and periodicals' (p. 60) – vanished within the first few years after the 1979 Revolution, dropping drastically to just over 200 titles. 'In 1981 alone, 175 newspapers were shut down. By March of 1988, the total number of newspapers and periodicals published in Iran was less than 121' (p. 60). Such enforced laws were to ensure nothing was published that had anything against the 'Islamic culture and government policies' and therefore 'after the revolution, press laws, such as a permit law, were passed which provided the state with complete control over what could be published in the print media' (Momayesi, 2000, p. 61).

Those writers in Iran who wrote anything on the banned subjects would use symbolism, allegories, and metaphor as a cover-up strategy in order to evade the harsh censor. The Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has certain grounds on the basis of which a book's publication will be refused and banned in Iran. Condemning and criticising Islamic doctrines, encouraging corruption and immorality, damaging the country's honour and independence, inspiring and urging the public to be dependent on superpowers, can be named as a few such grounds (Atwood, 2012). These restrictions became even heavier in terms of texts containing any romance. Not only prose fiction but also romantic verses, even the much acclaimed mystic and Sufi poetry which constituted a major part of prominent Persian literary classics by Rumi, Hafez, and other Muslim Sufi poets, were taken off the bookshelves and faced censorship, despite the fact that love and romance within these corpora were used symbolically and allegorically. They, as Fotouhi (2012) puts it, became 'rare to find commodities, even on the

black market’ (p. 22). She further mentions that ‘anything that dealt with dancing, drinking, and sexual relationships, or women’s bodies was strictly censored’ (p. 21). ‘With constant symbolic allusion to ecstasy, love, lust, music, dance, wine, love making, male/female relations and with normally risqué miniature-style imagery...these books were declared haram or illegal by authorities’ (Fotouhi, 2012, p. 70). Writers who in spite of all these restrictions still wrote anything on romance did so in exile where they had freedom and no fear of persecution.

A good example of such romance writers is Shahriar Mandanipour, a well-established Iranian fiction writer who put to use different subtle techniques in crafting his love stories to pass through the strict filter of censorship in post-revolutionary Iran. Although at first he succeeded in publishing his fiction books inside Iran, they were banned for a few years, and it was only after his migration to the USA in 2006 that he continued writing and publishing his romance novels freely. While in Iran, Mandanipour’s writing skills in employing certain literary tools and techniques – such as surrealistic, metaphoric, and symbolic language, stream of consciousness, as well as a word-choice with implicit connotations – all empowered him to address his readers in an indirect coded manner, something his intelligent readers could decipher by reading in between the lines, allowing him to go around the existing tough sanctions.

One of Shahriar Mandanipour’s most celebrated works, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (published in the USA in 2009) is a translation<sup>8</sup> of a Persian romance novel titled *Sansoor-e Yek Dastane Asheghaneh-e Irani* by the same name and author, with all Iranian aspects set in the more recent years of post-revolution Iran, a story that never received publication approval from the Iranian government. It is a love story which also on a deeper level addresses the censorship barrier Iranian writers – particularly romance writers – are struggling with, as well as the socio-political atmosphere of Iran around the turn of the twenty-first century, with emphasis on the issues relating to the booming young Iranian generation and the tough laws against love, lust, and intimate relationships outside marital borders.

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<sup>8</sup> Translated into English by Sara Khalili.

The story portrays Mandanipour's own life as a professional writer (using his own first name, Shahriar, for the character) who is fed up with writing gloomy, pessimistic fiction with sad endings under censorship, and thinks with all his literary experience, fame, and expertise, he is now brave enough to write a love story in Iran and publish it too. He is quite apprehensive about the type of objections the agent at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is going to make to his fiction, and so he as always self-censors his work without which he knows the work does not stand a chance of approval, and yet he is still defeated.

Mandanipour's writing style in this novel is ground breaking. In a two-layered plot, exchanging regular and bold fonts, he tells a love story while running parallel to that, he recounts a romance writer's bitter life challenges and survival techniques against the censorship in the current Iran, all in a humorous way. Not only does he address his readers but also his imaginary government agent in charge of the censorship, and at times even his own protagonists – Sara and Dara – the latter blaming him (Shahriar) for writing his character the way he has: 'browbeaten, pathetic, tormented, and miserable' (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 229). The reader reads on the page a small segment of the first draft which is then crossed out due to the author's obligation to self-censor and keep in mind that after all he needs to publish his book. Next, the reader reads other versions of the writer's rewording which are often so distorted and crippled in the process of self-censorship and so dissimilar to the original that at the end the story 'is no longer coherent' (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 239), making the writer give up and conclude that in Iran writing a romance is just as dangerous and impossible as having a romantic relationship (Mandanipour, 2009). He says it best in his own words addressing the imaginary censor officer whom he rightly calls Mr Petrovich:<sup>9</sup>

I no longer have any energy or passion to write ... Writing a love story with a happy ending is not in the destiny of writers of my generation ... and my work on this story is done. I no longer have any control over it or its characters. (2009, p. 292)

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<sup>9</sup> Mandanipour has named this character Petrovich because he intended to allude to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous character of the same name in his novel *Crime and Punishment* (published in Russia in 1866). As such both characters are nearly identical in personality traits.

This novel was originally written in Persian, before the author became a migrant, and it is the translated version that is used in this introduction. Nonetheless, as an essential source because of its cultural, linguistic, and socio-political values, as well as its momentous relevance to this research and the creative component, it will be compared to *Yousef's Sooreh*, examined, and made reference to in more detail in the other chapters.

## **Outline of research**

Part I of this dissertation covers substantial Iranian contextualisation of the challenges and issues hindering the composition of cross-cultural writing. In an attempt to systematically distinguish and categorise these challenges and issues, as well as to link them to the accompanying novel, I have divided them into two distinct groups – cultural differences and linguistic features – which are discussed separately in Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation. Before discussing these challenges, a section on the romance genre and its parameters is included, where a short survey of literature on the origins of the genre is undertaken, starting from the Middle Ages up to its boom as the most popular genre in contemporary literature, and particularly where it relates to fiction and novels. The discussion then focuses mainly on the genre's governing framework and specifications.

### **Chapter 1: The impact of cultural differences – The culture shock**

Goody and Watt (1968) state that 'the most significant elements of any human culture are undoubtedly channelled through words, and reside in the particular range of meanings and attitudes which members of any society attach to their verbal symbols' (cited in Wrigglesworth, 2007, p. 44). It is a great challenge to translate and convey a foreign culture into another culture and make it comprehensible worldwide without having to explicitly present essential cultural information. As Mandanipour, an Iranian fiction writer, admits, 'some things, certain actions in Iran are so strange and outlandish that without explaining them, it is impossible for an Iranian story to be well understood by non-Iranians' (2009, p. 183). Common places and times where cultural hindrances become perceptible and need to be dealt with are briefly discussed in this introduction. There are five

main challenges outlined below in two groups. First are the more abstract differences of the ideological beliefs and associated attitudes and values underlying a culture, and second are the more concrete differences in social behaviour, the customs, and conventions governing different kinds of interactions. Below is a brief outline, with more detailed elaboration in Chapter 1.

### ***Ideology***

- (a) Eastern collectivism vs Western individualism; the issue of identity and socio-cultural mask.
- (b) The patriarchal/male chauvinist nature of Iranian society.

### ***Social interactions***

- (c) *Ta'arof*: A routine and clichéd face-saving nicety (both in words and in deeds) commonly used in Iran – this directly impacts the narrative as it covers characters' true feelings, incentives, and identities; it also affects readers' understanding of characters.
- (d) The expression of respect to elders and guests – this may explain sudden shifts and unexpected actions in individual characters in the narrative.
- (e) The rules of interaction, conventions, and protocols governing members of the opposite sex who are not closely related – this affects readers' understanding of male–female romantic relationships, a major problem for an Iranian romance novel directed towards a global/Western audience, while acknowledging global Muslim readers who may or may not be familiar with the context.

## **Chapter 2: The Impact of linguistic features of Persian language – The translation trauma**

### ***Figures of speech – expressions, proverbs, similes, metaphors, symbols, and idioms***

Idioms and proverbs are elements of language that symbolise variations among cultures; it is by examining languages and comparing and analysing these linguistic elements that the similarities and differences between different cultures can be revealed (Wardhaugh, 1986). This is an intriguing and perennial problem in translation, particularly for literary texts and speeches that contain figurative language. In all likelihood, it can only be resolved on a case-by-case basis, as some figurative language could be understood if translated literally, even if the imagery seems exotic and novel to the reader in the new language. Other instances could be explained by the contextual action, such as the situation the metaphor is used to illustrate, or the actions taken or the replies characters make in response. Others still may require overt explanation, such as a note, and some may be left enigmatic for the reader to contemplate and discover through the broader text.

There are a few possible solutions to these problems. In this chapter, I examine other cross-cultural fiction to see how other authors deal with translating figurative language into English (both from Persian and from other languages) and presenting concepts that are unique to the original culture. There are some theories and standard techniques for dealing with these issues that I, as a translator/interpreter, can draw on from the discipline of translation studies.

### ***Lexical components, the lack of exact equivalents, and untranslatable terms***

Different semantic and lexical components that distinguish members of a group of words often hinder the writing process if the set of words exists in one language or dialect but not in the other. For example, in Persian there are eight different words synonymous to the word ‘cousin’, depending on the person’s gender, whether s/he is a maternal or paternal cousin, and also whether s/he is the child of an aunt or an uncle. The same is true for many abstract entities and concepts as well as certain concrete objects that are specific to Persian culture and

language and which do not exist in English. Other strategic translation tools that often spark extra problems include cultural borrowing, transliteration, and loan words, to name just a few. For instance, in this chapter, I explore other cross-cultural authors to see how they have tackled such problems.

***Contradictions in modes of address, forms, styles, prayers, profanity, and emotive attributes***

Bamiro (2011) states that ‘modes of address not only reflect cultural norms but also symbolize a speaker’s social position in relation to the people around him or her so that, by the use of one or other of them, the status of the speaker to the person addressed is readily recognized’ (p. 3). In Persian there is a special elevated form of addressing people of higher rank, elders, and those who hold more authority and pivotal social status. This respectful formal mode of address, however, cannot be used to the same degree and with exact equivalents in English, which lacks the required corresponding pronouns; therefore, reflecting this in the dialogue and finding a way to convey it to the reader presents a major challenge. Moreover, in Persian language, pronouns are gender-neutral, and as such they do not associate with any gender, and do not distinguish between them, which also can become a hindrance to the writer. There is linguistic evidence of variations in prayer forms, use of profanity and invective, as well as Persian being emotively loaded. By the latter I mean Persian words are often loaded with emotions that do not always come across in English.

***Nonverbal language, gestures, facial expressions, and body talk***

Conventionalised gestures and body movements, unlike illustrative ones, can be interpreted in a range of nuanced ways across different cultures (Archer, 1997; Efron, 1941/1972; Sparhawk, 1981). A gesture or body movement in one culture may have not only a different meaning in another culture, but may mean the exact opposite. As such, writing the characters’ reflexes/actions that relate to nonverbal language can become a real dilemma when such contradictions in gestures come up in the storyline. Is the cross-cultural writer obliged to stick with the convention appropriate to the story’s context and native characters, or should s/he alter them in accordance with the conventions of the West – the target readers? In

such fiction as *Yousef's Sooreh*, these contrastive nonverbal signals look awkward and inauthentic if certain remedial strategies are not implemented by the author.

## **Creative writing**

The creative component accompanying the above mentioned theoretical dissertation is a fictional romance novel titled *Yousef's Sooreh*. This story takes place during the 1979 Revolution in a Persian context and with all Persian characters. My interest, both as a researcher and as a translator/interpreter, is in exploring the techniques and aesthetic possibilities of writing cross-cultural fiction that represents aspects of Iranian culture, life, and language for an English-speaking audience using the medium of the English language. In light of the previously discussed evidence pointing to the fact that Iranian migrant writers have done a significant and comprehensive account of covering all the socio-political aspects and adversities of both pre- and post-revolutionary eras of this country, I did not intend to create something of the precise same nature, but to compose a romance with certain nuanced innovation and originality: a fiction about Iran, love, and faith.

This novel is the love journey of Soo and Joe, who happen to fall madly in love and have to defy the social, cultural, and religious odds to be together. This is a story about the impact of passionate love on the lives of individuals with high spiritual and religious standards, on the one hand, and the challenges and consequences brought about by going against the contextual norms and values, on the other.

## **Particular features of *Yousef's Sooreh***

This novel's particular features have already been discussed in detail within other sections of the introduction but will also be briefly restated here:

1. This story has a twofold plotline with a double faceted perspective to build up a touching romance. While it deals with hurdles caused by external, social conflicts that any romantic love in the real world might encounter, it also deals with obstacles that are mostly linked with the inner issues

between individuals in a specific culture who share a specific religious faith. The exceptionality of this story's protagonists – who are at surface level nearly complete opposites of one another and have not much in common – is meant to add to the conflict and make any supposed resolution seem almost impossible.

2. It brings to light the minority of true Iranian Muslims who have so far been disregarded and left unnoticed under the dominant layers of other stereotyped Muslims in Iran. In this context, it elaborates on and presents this community whose unique sufferings are underestimated, unattended to, and unidentified, even though there are other Muslim romances set in other contexts elsewhere in the world that contain similar features.
3. While some of the other romances and love stories under study in this research have the love element not directly placed at the core of the narrative but rather somewhere parallel to other themes, in *Yousef's Sooreh*, as a romance novel, the main plot, as well as the subplots, are directly linked to the love story as the central nucleus. Looking analytically at other themes intermingled with the main romance in this novel, they all take secondary position to the love story. Basically, these other themes come to existence when authors craft sub-plots essential to drive the love story forward by making the hero and the heroine go through phases and overcome obstacles to make progress in their relationship within the love journey. These themes are indeed crucial to any novel that aims to do better having more than a one-dimensional theme and plotline. However, how the lovers treat one another in the process and whether they will ever be happily united form the main objective of the narrative in the conventional, popular genre of the romance novel. Even though he was applying his comments more broadly to historical romances, Mikhail Bakhtin (1975/1981), as quoted in Haag-Higuchi (2003), does state that:

The hero of the romance, the situation of his life, his actions and whatever happens to him, do not have any socio-political significance. The relation between the hero and his beloved is the centre of all events in the romance, which derive their significance exclusively from this –

temporarily troubled – love affair. Even an event like war acquires significance only by being related to the love of the protagonists. (pp. 136–137)

As this idea might be appropriately applicable to allegorical medieval romance, most contemporary Iranian writers surveyed in this research have been concordantly against the dismissal of outside societal events from the protagonists' love journey. As a matter of fact, they promote it in order to improve the quality and the palatability of their novels. But for the project of this thesis, the focus remains on the love relationship and the cultural and familial quandaries it produces, which involves clear investigation of the social implications of romance in the specific, Iranian cultural and religious context of the work.

4. As Saricks (1999) states, 'because romances are character centered, they rely more on dialogue than description, and they are seldom written in dense, more difficult prose' (p. 244). By employing third person omniscient point of view, present tense, and relatively more emphasis on dialogue, I have tried to allow the readers to be in the context, follow everything closely, see and hear things as if they are happening right in front of their eyes. This, I hope, helps connect the readers with characters' inner thoughts and feelings, and their relationships. Also, there is no going back and forth from one scene and plot to the other(s), giving the readers some fragments of the narrative and then repositioning them somewhere else in the story. The readers are set in one separate scene at a time and are submerged in all that is happening in that specific moment in the story. I attempted to transfix and hold the readers at the very centre of scenes without jarring them too much, so that they can thoroughly delve into the nature and the depth of the interactions and the connections.
5. Being entirely Persian and Iranian, in terms of character ethnicity and context, is a rare and highly uncommon feature of this romance novel within the realm of Iranian diasporic fiction. *Yousef's Sooreh* can therefore make a contribution in filling this gap in the literature. So far, review of the literature shows only Mahbod Seraji's *Rooftops of Tehran* to possess a

similar quality, except that his novel is not purely fictional. As previously mentioned, Seraji, too, aimed to write about Iranian culture, traditions, and politics, as well as creating a love story (Seraji, 2009b). Keeping in mind the abundant existence of other fiction novels composed by Iranian writers, I wanted the novel for this submission to be a romance confined within the boundaries of Iran and everything Iranian, without adhering to issues like escape, migration, return, or multicultural love and marriage in the storyline, which is one of the major components prevalently done and dealt with in other cross-cultural novels of its type. Besides, in order to draw readers' attention to the real nature of male–female relationships in contemporary Iran, the domestic familial issues between Muslim Persian men and women, and how love challenges this particular Muslim group, I had to make sure this romance was entirely Iranian.

6. *Yousef's Sooreh* is also one of the rare works of its type in which every attempt has been made to 'show not tell' when it comes to expressing passionate, romantic feelings overtly between the lovers. I have been particularly determined to refrain from using the most common, yet clichéd statement of all – 'I love you' – in the dialogue anywhere in the story, and especially between the hero and the heroine, even though such expressions along with certain sensual/erotic actions are often considered indispensable in a romance novel. As such, the lack of explicit sentimental endearments or physical intimacy in *Yousef's Sooreh* is not merely because this novel embraces the features of spiritual/inspirational romance. I intentionally aimed to allow these feelings and sensations to be conveyed and perceived through the deeds and hearts of the lovers rather than through their words. More importantly, I intended to leave it to the reader's imagination to freely visualise what words could only limit in their portrayal.

Considering the fact that no exact similar work to this novel has been created before, all in all, I believe *Yousef's Sooreh* with its peculiar features will be a unique text, which will in turn bring further innovation to the field of romance fiction in the literature of diaspora.







# **PART I**

## **A PERSIAN LOVE STORY IN ENGLISH: THEORETICAL RESEARCH COMPONENT**

### **Romance genre and its parameters**

The onset of the literary romance genre in the West goes back to as early as twelfth-century French fiction. The more visible signs of the romance genre appeared in the late Middle English historical era and early Renaissance period of the fifteenth century; therefore, the genesis of romance fiction can be dated back to the medieval period (Middle Ages) – particularly the Breton lais.<sup>10</sup> Examining literary romance from an orientalist perspective also shows evidence pointing to the genre's Islamic Middle Eastern origins prior to its emergence in Greece and Rome and before it was officially established in the Western world as a distinct genre (Metlitzki, 1977; Robinson, 2002).

According to Sir Walter Scott (1824) a romance is 'a fictitious narrative in prose or verse; the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents' (cited in Levine, 1979, p. 152), although in a broad variation to this and in line with modern definitions Regis (2003) defines romance novel as 'a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines' (p. 14). The most foundational romances are Dante's *Divine Comedy* (published in Italy in 1847) and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (published in the UK in 1597). The most notable pioneers in English romance novels include: Samuel Richardson with his novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (published in the UK in 1740), Nathaniel Hawthorne with *The Scarlet Letter* (published in the USA in 1850), Charlotte Brontë with *Jane Eyre* (published in the UK in 1847), and later Georgette Heyer (inspired by Jane Austen) with *Black Moth* (published in the UK in 1921). However, the fundamental cornerstone in contemporary Western romance is Austen's acclaimed nineteenth-century classic: *Pride and*

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<sup>10</sup> Short French and English love tales told in rhymed verse in the medieval times.

*Prejudice* (published in the UK in 1813). It is one of the best novels this early in terms of following the conventional plot (outlined below).

The basic conventional plot of the genre romance, which is well-known to all romance writers and researchers, consists of: a) the meeting between the significant others, b) the obstacles appearing on their way to unification, c) their declaration of love for one another, and d) the resolution of the conflicts by love's triumph (Regis, 2003; Taylor, 2007; and others). Although the genre was initially humbled and underestimated for its feminine typology, in regard to both author and readership (Isaksson, 2014; O'Neil, 2016), its popularity took off rapidly and continued throughout the past three centuries (Turner, 2014). While the abovementioned classical founders as well as other front-runners of the genre (e.g., Sir Walter Scott, Barbara Cartland, and Catherine Cookson) focused mainly on emotional and abstract sides of relationships, later in the twentieth century, the physical aspects of intimacy were also brought onto the page by American authors such as Kathleen Woodiwis who pioneered in transfiguring the genre in her novel, *The Flame and the Flower* (published in the USA in 1972). Moreover, the definition and common usage of 'romance' as a generic category of romance has changed from Sir Walter Scott to Kathleen Woodiwiss, becoming far more affiliated with the genre of popular romance.

The evolution which took place in romance novels throughout the past centuries changed the original classic romances of marvellous epic chivalry and grand adventurous incidents to the more down-to-earth, passionate-love-centred type of romances known as popular romances of the contemporary era, such as Harlequin/ Mills & Boon romances and later 'bodice-rippers'. Yet that is not to say that romance writers of genre fiction stopped writing literary or historical romances. Historical romances are never out of fashion, especially since they provide a joyful sense of escapism from the often not-so-pleasant realities of modern life. 'Regency romances' pioneered by romance novelist Georgette Heyer are proof of that. Even nowadays some contemporary romance writers such as Beverly Jenkins, Lorraine Heath, and Sherry Thomas write historical romances just as they write popular/commercial fiction for the mass market. In fact, Kathleen Woodiwiss only wrote historical romance novels until her death in

2007. Besides, the boundaries are becoming more blurred and indistinguishable than they were before, so much so that many hardcover romance novels are now being published in paperback.

In addition, the Islamic/halal romance is a global emerging trend within contemporary genre fiction. The Indian-Bangladeshi novelist, Kasem bin Abubakar, the author of *Futonto Golap (The Blossomed Rose)* (published in Bangladesh in 1978), was one of the first to establish this category of novels which are based on passionate love, and in which the fundamental Islamic sharia laws and cultural values of the East govern most – if not all – of the structural elements of the story. Syed Ikram Hussain Abidi, the Pakistani author of *Hijaab Waali ... the Veiled Girl* (published in Malaysia in 2006), is another acclaimed pioneer who has published a few novels within the same category of Muslim romance.

According to Regis, '[t]he romance novel in the twentieth century has remained a mass cultural phenomenon' (2003, p. 109). The already top-selling, favourite genre choice gained a huge success and popularity with its holistic fulfilment of sensual as well as affective longings in popular audience, and hence came the publishing industry's fastidious selection of writers and works, in aiming for the maximum market profit. They knew what the romance readers wanted, and readers – as stated by Radway (1991) and Regis (2003) – are the sharpest judges of romance novels. (This may be an exaggeration, however, since such books are full of clichés and written to formulas with shallow characterisation.) Still, the editors and publishers formed a somewhat critical perspective, expecting certain pre-prescribed specificities in romance novels. This gave way to the formalism of the genre and in turn led to the establishment of set conventions the romance genre is famous for in the mid-twentieth century onwards. Any type of nuance, deviating plot, dramatisation, and characterisation outside these defined frameworks of genre parameters, which were deemed to endanger the skyrocketing sales, were discouraged in a new manuscript, especially works by emerging authors.

In saying that, however, there is complexity between reader/text/industry. Readers drive the market with their buying power – the publishers publish what

sells – and what sells says a lot about the readers and the cultures they inhabit and contribute to. Effectively, there are three publishing industries: literary, general/mainstream, and entertainment/popular. Tightly proscribed romance – romance written strictly in terms of romance genre conventions – fits into the entertainment/popular industry (which is where Barbara Cartland and Kathleen Woodiwiss fit, for example), but there is also more ‘literary’ romance (such as the Brontës or Austen, often in film and television adaptations), and also general fiction examples (such as in the popular novels of Catherine Cookson or literary authors such as Audrey Niffenegger with *The Time Traveller’s Wife*). Each of these genres and industries has different expectations of the texts. While Harlequin/Mills & Boon (entertainment/popular) might be highly critical and proscriptive – to satisfy both critique of traditional romance and keep strictly with the conventions of the genre – a literary publisher might not.<sup>11</sup>

As with all genres and accounting for their endurance in popularity, the romance genre shows the capacity for plasticity and change. The inherent capacity for a genre to be moulded and changed is also largely because of cultural and social shifts in gender relationships, as well as the demands of the publishing industry since romance is the biggest earner for publishing companies by far. As a result, both readers and the publishing industry allowed more room in the narrative for variation in the conventional parameters. While some generic elements remained as paramount as always, other anatomic foundations of the genre were reformed significantly. Yet this is in no way indicating that the traditional conventions of romance and classic structure of the genre have been tremendously revolutionised.

In her study on romance novels, Kamble and her group of romance readers and writers discuss the plasticity and pliability of these novels and how some of them destabilise, undermine and even expand and broaden the genre (2008). Certain anomalies and idiosyncrasies within the framework of the romance genre are accepted and inevitable. These nuances were in fact welcomed for their contribution in adding innovative aestheticism to the genre. Still, even when the conventions of romance change throughout different eras, the necessary formal

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<sup>11</sup> The points in this paragraph have been made by Dr Amy Matthews in her valuable comments on the dissertation.

specificities and elements of the genre within those conventions remain intact (Regis, 2003).

I will mention some of the main parameters before moving on to the modifications made to the genre (subgenres), while stressing the unanimous congruence among writers and researchers that when it comes to conformity to the conventions there is no perfect romance novel (Regis, 2003).

- (a) One of the unalterable thematic traits of romances is the unconditional victory of the female protagonist always and in all ways (Krentz, 1992) which is another reason the genre is regarded as feminine.
- (b) As another immutable common element in romances, I can refer to Clements' postulation that there must be a significant degree of endangerment surrounding and confining the lovers, making them greatly concerned about the wellbeing of one another (2011). This is evident in high levels of emotional investments and psychological preoccupations lovers are involved with, even when apart.
- (c) The obstacles and hurdles on the love journey hold significance and centrality – as also pointed out by De Rougement (1940/1983) and Kokkola (2011) – which is essential for building the much required dramatic conflict of high stakes. Moreover, this conflict has to be existent throughout the narrative and also be of utmost importance and value, worthy enough to greatly endanger the lovers (Parv, 1997; Walker, 2004).
- (d) In addition, all romances must be emotionally gratifying, so there is always a happy ending, or a 'Happily Ever After' element, regardless of the absence of superficial unification (e.g., marriage) for the lovers at the end of the novel. A happy and optimistic ending is a well-known component of the romance. As also confirmed by Kaler (1999), romance 'has a happy ending, always and in all ways. This endearing ending is the most critical and enduring convention of the romance genre' (p. 4).
- (e) The love relationship must also be the core element overshadowing other themes and subplots in the narrative, even in novels where the protagonists

are overwhelmed by the magnitude of other influential factors in their lives, such as war, famine, plague, etc.

To name a few of the transformations in the basic constituents of romance, the following can be mentioned:

- (a) Equal gender roles and reversed power relations for the hero and the heroine with more conformances to feminist stance (as opposed to patriarchal male-dominant segregated duties).
- (b) Crafting more caring, kind, and emotionally supportive male heroes who are not in need of taming and domestication by their significant others (as is the case in Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century stereotype male protagonist, Mr Rochester, in *Jane Eyre*). The male protagonists do not necessarily act as protective chivalrous saviours – in fact they can even be written as physically impaired and handicapped<sup>12</sup> – (as opposed to the good looking bad-boy wild stereotype male protagonist). At the same time, the weak, needy, and passive stereotype female protagonists are replaced by more independent, determined, free-willed, and confident heroines.
- (c) Adherence to more linear, neutral sexual orientation in relationships between the lovers (as opposed to heterosexually oriented ones, portraying the traditional prototype of active aggressive male/passive submissive female).
- (d) Depolarising and redefining moral values, and blurring the unyielding borders between good/evil, hero/villain by allowing more dynamism in the central characters, who can willfully move within the grey domain in between two extremes, and are realistic and believable enough to be related to and identified with by common readers.
- (e) Utilisation of triad type relationships (i.e., love triangles) among protagonists to enhance the chances of redemption in characters by unleashing their otherwise undisclosed personal attributes and their multi-

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<sup>12</sup> See Jackie Williams's romance novels (e.g., *Running Scarred*, *Forever Scarred*, *Scarred Horizon*, and *Scarred Beginnings*) for this type of nonconformist male protagonist.

dimensionalities (as opposed to a customary two-way courtly love bond between the two main lovers). For instance, creating a love-triangle by crafting a character such as Rasool in *Yousef's Sooreh* (an antagonist who portrays Soo's cousin and husband), has brought out a great deal more about other characters' personalities, all of which would have otherwise remained hidden. It is through him that Soo shows what she means by true love, and whether she can succumb to an arranged marriage, which aside from the absence of love is perfect in every other sense. It is also partly through him that Soo's family, as well as the readers, gets to know the real Joe (the story's hero and protagonist). Moreover, since *Yousef's Sooreh* revolves around two unconventional protagonists as the lovers, the transference of many startling cultural conventions – both in a stereotypical Iranian husband figure, as well as the traditional marriage ceremonies – are only made possible with the triad-type relationship with this character.

- (f) Rearrangement and reassessment done in romance novels in the employment of the famous four types of love – *storge*, *philia*, *eros*, and *agape*<sup>13</sup> – introduced and differentiated by ancient Greek writers (Kokkola, 2011), in such a way that agapic love is not necessarily preferred and acknowledged over the passionate erosic (archaic Greek version of 'erotic', sexual) feelings, neither do these four forms of love necessarily follow the conventional orders of juxtaposition in contemporary novels (as opposed to the traditional trend of their hierarchical positioning in the classical literature).

The more liberated and open-minded prospect granted more flexibility to the contemporary genre and loosened the tightknit tropes of the classical romance. This helped rectify and maintain the endangered authenticity of the romance by welcoming a range of new themes offered by emerging authors. This helped re-establish the indispensable dramatisation vital to the romance themes which had turned repetitively formulaic and soulless (see also O'Neil, 2016; Radway, 1984, 1991, 1994). Moreover, it made the genre more permeable to inevitable mergers with other genres such as epic, comedy, science fiction,

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<sup>13</sup> In Greek, *storge* is the love for family and kin; *philia* is the love among friends, neighbours, community, etc.; *eros* is the romantic love; and *agape* is the spiritual love (Kokkola, 2011).

paranormal, erotica, etc. (Novak, 2010), creating other notable subgenres, bringing more fame for pop-fiction romance in contemporary English literature as well as reaping financial gains for the publishing industry, media, and writers alike.

Lastly, as stated by Britton, who explored the classic Italian romance-epics of Ariosto and Tasso of sixteenth-century Renaissance, a notable attribute of genre romance is its ‘ability to transform and incorporate difference’ (2007, p. 38). This explains the relatively prolific extent of ‘Sheikh Romances’,<sup>14</sup> a Western white woman’s journey to a land in the deserts of East and her falling in love with an Eastern coloured man of exalted social stature (Taylor, 2007). These early twentieth-century romance novels are breakaways of traditional genre norms in their reversal of power relations between the protagonists within the colonial context. Their unconventionalities become multi-faceted when cultural standards of East and West intermingle with those of the romance genre tropes. One question remains though; does this attribute makes these cross-cultural romance novels functional and resourceful means of cultural transference, enabling them to bridge the gaps between nations? Despite the reversals of power, the orientalism of the majority of these works written by Western authors is stereotypical on the basis of orientalist constructions of the East, as to not reflect these cultures in any way beyond the parameters of white mythologies of the orient.<sup>15</sup>

In *Yousef’s Sooreh*, however, attempts have been made to this end. The novel accompanying this research brings a more authentic perspective to the possibilities of the modern Persian-based romance set in Iranian contemporary culture. It both conforms to the standard parameters of the romance genre and presents its own non-formulaic authenticities derived from the Persian Muslim heritage of Iran.

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<sup>14</sup> See also:

Hull, E. M. (1919). *The Sheik*. London, UK: Eveleigh Nash and Grayson.

Rawlins, D. (2002). *By the Sheikh’s command*. Toronto: Harlequin.

Reid, M. (2002a). *The Sheikh’s chosen wife*. Toronto: Harlequin.

Reid, M. (2002b). *The Arabian love-child*. Toronto: Harlequin.

<sup>15</sup> See also: Teo, H. (2012). *Desert passions: Orientalism and romance novels*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

## **Feminist scholarship on romance**

The paradox between romance and feminism has been the subject of debate as well as ample research ever since the start of the feminist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. There is a ‘complicated relationship between feminism and the romance genre’ (Dugger, 2014, p. 1). As Ang (1988) states, ‘the enormous popularity of romantic fiction with women has always presented a problem for feminism’ (p. 180). This put most popular romance readers as well as literary and academic writers of romance with critical feminist ideologies in a dilemma, or in a so-called ‘hate to love’ situation. On the one hand, their very popular genre with its skyrocketing sales had gone under question with harsh criticism; and on the other hand, they could not help becoming advocates of equal rights for women. Radway, as a feminist scholar, academic, and an expert on popular fiction and its female audience also agrees that the connection between romance, women, and feminism has been an irritating and problematic one in the women’s liberation and rights movement (1984).

Since patriarchy and romance have a way of commingling regardless of the amount of changes made to the foundational formula of romance, this contradiction still exists but to a much less extent compared with earlier historical romances. Romance novelists with feminist perspectives have aimed to bridge this wide gap by crafting more equal protagonists and more relatable lifelike plotlines, and hence along came the feminist romances. Heroines are re-formed to be stronger, more independent, outspoken, and self-confident women who do not necessarily need to be passive, clingy, dependent, and in need of rescue to qualify as likable heroines as they used to be in most historical romances. Likewise heroes do not always resemble a so-called knight in shining armour stereotype. In fact, they are at times in need of being rescued by the heroine or other characters in the story. Jojo Moyes’ *Me before You* (published in the UK in 2012) is an example of such contemporary romance novels, though it is an extreme case and pushes the boundaries of the genre to its limits.

Furthermore, as Young (2011) and others pinpoint, in terms of constitution of female subjectivity and assigning feminine/masculine roles and spheres to the genders in contemporary popular romances, there is hardly any objectionable

contradiction with feminist views and values. ‘In the romance, both the heroine and, significantly, the hero opt for a committed relationship (Dugger, 2014, p. 11). Falling in love, acknowledgement of the mutual love, marriage, and the Happily Ever After element are all in line with domesticising the hero who gives up all that the patriarchal environment grants him for the sake of his beloved heroine. Still, other critics such as Modleski (1984) assert that the authority and superiority of the male figure stays unquestioned in romance novels.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, the controversial dilemma of feminism vs. patriarchy is dealt with in a nuanced way, keeping in mind that there are also religious and cultural norms and barriers in play, all of which make radical alterations to the characters impractical. (For example, changing the heroine's reserved character to being outspoken or a non-virgin would be clashing with the cultural and religious norms of Islamic Iran, hence not an appropriate choice of alteration in this novel.) Sexualisation of the heroine (allowing them to take an active role in asserting their desires and breaking away from their traditional passive roles) is believed to have given female protagonists more equal and balanced gender roles in the erotic romances of the past decades (late 1970s onwards) compared with classic, historical, as well as sweet/chaste romances, such as *Yousef's Sooreh*. Among some other critics, Thurston (1987) argues that, ‘[i]n contrast to the position that all romance novels present conservative patriarchal norms, the erotic romance portrays nontraditional sex roles, values, and power relationships as both natural and expected’ (p. 8). This shift has been noted as a positive movement in line with feminist ideologies (Thurston, 1987; Lee, 2008), and hence the feminist movement consequently paved the way and legitimised erotic bodice-ripper fiction, which until not long ago used to receive severe criticism for its sexism and conservatism.

Nuancing heroism and the heroic component was a different matter in *Yousef's Sooreh* as it allowed more freedom to make constructive changes from the standpoint of feminist theory. But instead of eliminating this component which genre romance is famous for, heroism is divided and diverted to both Soo and Joe, as well as allowing this heroic mode to be put towards helping others, rather than the hero-saving-heroine traditional archetype. This is witnessed not

only in the backstory of the novel – when Soo as a courageous eight-year-old assists Joe in saving his life – but also throughout the narrative in the domestic violence incident, the car-repair training, the night of the shooting – when although Joe comes to the rescue, Soo has already saved herself and could have saved them all – or when Soo rescues her dissolute friend, Tahmineh, and above all, her escape on her wedding night without Joe's assistance.

In the male-chauvinistic Iran of the late 1970s, it is only natural for men to treat women as usable commodities and for their own advantages. We read how all her suitors – including her first husband, her cousin Rasool – want to possess Soo without knowing her, nor her wishes, nor having any respect for her future plans and dreams, but only because of her exceptional looks and their imaginings of her body. They have not seen her without her covers, but her face is visible. Besides, women, who are allowed to see her without her hijab, have spread the news to others about her physical appearance, and this is enough incentive for men to desire her. Moreover, she is a devout and chaste girl, and what man would not want to taste the untouchable, forbidden fruit no other man has ever tasted or will ever taste once she is married?

However, Joe falls madly in love with Soo for all her other characteristics that go beyond what meets the eye. In a way he finds a female version of himself in her with identical inner attributes (i.e., great strength, bravery, resilience, adventurousness, and philanthropic benevolence towards humankind), and above all, there is his unyielding belief in her having saved his life in childhood. In fact, the latter – which is brought into the novel as a backstory at first and then made reference to in a number of occasions throughout the novel – is embedded within the narrative in the form of a second encounter between the lovers in the past. This incident is designed as an equaliser of power distribution between the genders to reduce the hero's semi-omnipotent character and enhance the feminist features of this romance novel. It has also accentuated the power of the romance heroine by highlighting her strong will and courageousness even in childhood. This backstory not only escalates the feminist properties of the novel by balancing out the heroic attributes between the hero and the heroine, but also helps rationalise the intensity of romantic love between the lovers in a spiritual

romance novel where there is no sensual element brought into play. It explains how Joe's prior fascination with Soo – in spite of his rebellious, unruly, and embittered nature as a teenager – makes him relentless in pursuing her of all people when he finds out she is still single, and why he is unable to give up on Soo regardless of all her attempts to repel him. As a further attempt to depict how feminism can also have a place in the patriarchal Iran of the 1970s and even in the lives of Muslim middle-class families, the characters of Soo's father, as well as Joe's father, and even Joe himself are clearly written as feminists.

The body of research is so far weighted on the side of allowing certain flexibilities in the conventions of the genre as a means of mediating between romance and feminism. That is as long as the male protagonist (hero) gives up his patriarchal authority in order to respect the female protagonist (heroine) and make room for her future goals and dreams, the story can be positioned as a feminist romance. Based on these contributions to critical feminism as well as to romance genre, *Yousef's Sooreh* can well be categorised within the paradigm of feminist romance.

## Chapter 1

### The Impact of Cultural Differences – The Culture Shock

In today's world, culture is not merely a subject of interest to tourists, historians, and archaeologists. Understanding different cultures has more than aesthetic, artistic, and academic objectives, to be viewed only through these paradigms and perspectives. It is of utmost gravity nowadays for various reasons. Sugirtharajah (2001) states that 'one postcolonial concern is the unexpected amalgamation of peoples, ideas, cultures and religions' (p. 537). In light of the noteworthiness of culturally loaded works of fictions and the role they play in our understanding other cultures, this chapter is intended to hopefully offer some assistance to future writers, who envisage writing an Iranian story in English. Whilst there is no denying the efficiency and usefulness of these texts, composing a migrant/diasporic literary work requires overcoming the cultural barriers that hinder transmitting the author's intended message to the less culturally-aware reader. Tseo (1996) states that 'it is undeniable that people of different cultures and eras can be quite distinct in the ways they think and hence act' (p. 341). This is especially pertinent to creating stories based in Iran. The reason is that although this is true in all cultures, some researchers such as Beeman (2014) believe that Iranians in particular use language not just for communication but as a tool to gain social control.

It is a great challenge to portray a foreign culture and make it comprehensible worldwide. In this chapter I attempt to depict, analyse, and offer some solutions to the cultural challenges specific to the Iranian context, while directing more attention to crafting romance fiction and making references to the creative component of this dissertation, *Yousef's Sooreh*. These challenges are outlined below in two main groups. First are the more abstract differences of the ideological beliefs and associated attitudes and values underlying a culture, and second are the more concrete differences in social behaviour and the customs and conventions governing different kinds of interactions.

Notwithstanding, my general acknowledgment of challenges in the introduction by no means implies that there are always certain problems to be

solved in the writing of this type of fiction; nor does it imply that different types of challenges need different solutions. My broad and extensive elaboration of Iranian society is to better contextualise my novel and give the audience a greater familiarity about Iran and Iranians. The comprehensive portrayal of cultural, religious, social, and familial specificities does not mean that the challenges or strategies are just as broad. At times, the same strategy can be used for more than one challenge – such as dealing with issues which arise from patriarchy, *aberu*, or *namous*. At other times, often a simple, concise definition or explanation either in the dialogue or in the description is sufficient to shed light on several cultural and religious behaviours – and not only in that specific place in the narrative but in other parts too where the storyline feels rather bumpy. For this reason, Chapter 1 tends to be heavier on the descriptive side, and in spite of its being analytical as well, there is not much repetitive mention of these similar or identical strategies.

## **Ideology**

### **Eastern collectivism vs Western individualism**

Cultural individualism/collectivism (henceforth referred to as I/C) has been considered a great distinguishing characteristic between the Western and the Eastern worlds. Ralston, Egri, Stewart, Terpstra, and Yu (1999b) believe that measuring I/C is the best way to assess the differences among cultures. Iran has long been identified as one of the nations with high collective structure (see, for example, Ali & Amirshahi, 2002; Hofstede, 1980; Metcalfe & Murfin, 2011; Milani, 1990; Paköz, 2007; Walker, Walker, & Schmitz, 2003). There has been a more recent trend towards the emergence of a certain degree of individualism in Iranian's out-group relations in the societal realm. Yet at the same time, the strength of collectivism seems to remain solid in regard to familial bonds, and in-group ties, which consist of affiliations with small groups, such as friends and relatives (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 1998; Hutchings, Mohannak, & Sendjaya 2011; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Sharifian, 2013).

Unlike in Western societies where autonomy is highly regarded and where individuals have their own distinct voice, values, independence, identity, way of

living, and their responsibility for themselves as well as their immediate family, in Iran people live more collectively with much adherence to social relationships. Massud Alemi, when describing his novel *Interruptions* (2008b) which narrates a gay relationship in post-revolution Iran, states that ‘the biggest sin of traditional societies is that they always sacrifice the individual for the collective whim’ (p. 1). Collectivistic cultures are basically distinguished by their people’s association with certain distinct social group(s), with whose members they share similar values and feel comfortable to establish loyal bonds. Though such bonds exist in individualistic contexts as well – in fact it prevailed in the West for centuries, and it can still be found in vulnerable communities, such as small religious sects, bikies clubs, and small country towns – in a collective society these bonds are stronger because it is through these connections that individuals receive the support, protection, and life-long loyalty they count on to survive the hardships of a troubled society. Individualism and collectivism have been addressed extensively in terms of their impact on language. The domain reflects a few other sub-branching areas in which cultural comparisons are deemed requisite, especially when it relates to composing narratives. The more significant of these are examined below.

### ***Individualism/Collectivism and the sociocultural mask***

In relationship-based collectivistic cultures, such as the ones in most Middle Eastern nations, abiding by the rules of the group is a requisite trait and highly expected from a group member. Prescribed rules of the group limit its members’ behaviours and deeds, including and particularly any which can be classified as individualistic. Earning the trust of a group, affiliation with its members, and maintaining that bond are unquestionable requisites. Yet they are not easily gained; nor is it simple to remain loyal to the group and rely on its members’ support. A group’s judgement and criticism of a member has consequences. Any violation not only endangers the reputation and honour of the individual and his/her family but also that of the group’s s/he is affiliated and identified with (Baxter, 2007; Mojab, 2005; Schneider, 2012). Moreover, noncompliance with the rules leads to gossip, backbiting, slander, hypocrisy, defamation, character assassination, and eventually isolation, desolation, and abandonment, all of which

are heavy prices to be paid in such societies where much reliance is made on these ties. This will eventually cause expulsion of the individual from the group and the loss of face, honour, and reputation. As such, keeping everything and everyone functioning and content requires a mask I refer to as socio-cultural mask which segregates the internal and external worlds of individuals in collective societies.

### ***Aberu***

This discernment in regard to preservation of ‘reputation’ and ‘honour’ has been so powerful in Iranians that it has led to formation of ‘*aberu*’, which is a social merit of high value to Iranians, a trait similar to, yet beyond the aforementioned two in intensity. It is ‘perhaps the most dominant cultural schema in the Persian cultural cognition’ (Sharifian, 2013, p. 96). Defining *aberu* as ‘keeping face’ would be to use its closest equivalent in English. However, *aberu* does not only relate to keeping face as a sole personality constituent but rather incorporates the face of the family, relatives, tribe, community, groups, or the face of the whole network the individual is automatically conscious of and concerned about. This is particularly in force in Iran’s collective context where reliance on these bonds makes societal interactions functional.

Moreover, the public’s opinion is of prime concern in collective contexts. Not only engaging in forbidden acts but also the mere provoking of suspicion in others to such taboos can cause gossip and ruin one’s reputation (Baxter, 2007). Iranians tend to evaluate and adjust their words and deeds according to social judgements (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 1998; Sharifian, 2013). Their frequent self-confrontation with this, often asking the clichéd question: ‘what would people say?’ or what Sharifian calls ‘people’s talk’ (2013, p. 98), is how they constantly assess their own self-respect and self-worth in a challenge to gain public approval. They also judge others on the basis of the same standards. Honour, as Sharifian states, ‘embodies the image of a person, a family, or a group, particularly as viewed by others in the society’ (2007, p. 36). Though the central role of females in maintaining *aberu* will be discussed later, in *Yousef’s Sooreh* we read:

Ebrahim adds, ‘Can’t you see how this [Soo’s lack of interest in an arranged marriage] is affecting our whole family? An Iranian family’s *aberu*, name, and honour revolve around the dignity of its females. In our culture what you are is not as important as what people think you are.’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 11)<sup>16</sup>

Don and Izadi declare that the application of *aberu* extends to even affecting individuals at a professional level: ‘In Iranian culture, breaching the norms of a community of practice may even bring about losing the *aberu* of the whole profession’ (2011, p. 3789). Thus, *aberu*’s comprehensive definition surpasses that of face. It is multilayered and inclusive of several cultural schemas, such as ‘power distance’, *ta’arof*<sup>17</sup> (ritual politeness), and also socio-cultural mask.

This socio-cultural mask Iranians often wear is the tendency to have a certain dualism, a twofold etiquette and conduct, in public compared to the private spheres: ‘outer’ vs ‘inner’ worlds (*zاهر* vs *باطن* in Persian) (Beeman, 1986, 1988; Hillman 1981; Milani, 1992; Sprachman, 2002). Iranians are culturally confined to act in accordance with more formality in public (*zاهر*) keeping in mind the rules of conduct such as ‘*ta’arof*’, ‘power distance’, ‘respect for authority and the elderly’, to name a few, while a more relaxed and freer personality, as well as informal style of language, is manifested in the presence of close ones within their private zones (O’Shea, 2000; Sharifian, 2005, 2007).

As reflected in *Yousef’s Sooreh*, the accompanying novel for this submission, *aberu* and ‘people’s opinion’ (or the famous *what would people say?* quandary) go hand in hand. In the majority of occasions they are used interchangeably within the text, and sometime even together to emphasise the significance of keeping the outer face in front of others in order to prevent gossip and false rumours. This is mentioned in *Yousef’s Sooreh* on a number of occasions. In light of the fact that it determines how Iranians think and behave, it is a major plot-turner in a story based in Iran. Following are a few examples of this from *Yousef’s Sooreh*:

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<sup>16</sup> Page numbers for *Yousef’s Sooreh* refer to the creative work submitted for this dissertation.

<sup>17</sup> *Ta’arof* is discussed separately in this chapter, since it is known to be exclusive to Persian culture, and as such it has a more extensive impact on narratives composed in English.

- (1) 'A girl like you who – as they say – *can bring sight to a blind man*, and who also comes from a decent and respected family like ours, should not pass the age of eighteen in her father's home. What would people say?' says Khanom Jaan. (p. 10)
- (2) 'Over my dead body you're spending the night in this place,' says Ebrahim ... 'For God's sake, you're a young woman. Have you lost your mind and manners? Since when have you ever slept anywhere other than your father's or your uncle's home? What will people say? How can you endanger yourself and our *aberu* like this?' (pp. 105–106)
- (3) '[I]f you had told us her wishes from the beginning, there was no way we would have allowed this marriage to take place.'
- ...
- 'What will people say? There will be no *aberu* left for us. We'll be the subject of ridicule and gossip among the community ...' cries Ameneh. (p. 182)

Example (1) illustrates the fact that any girl past the age of eighteen, who is still single in her father's home, is the subject of shame and gossip. In the public eye, the only two possible reasons for this would be that she has some medical conditions or a boyfriend. Example (2) is when Soo's assistance is desperately needed at the orphanage overnight, and her elders are against the idea of her spending the night in a place other than home, despite the fact that it is nearly an all-female environment. Example (3) depicts Ameneh's state of mind and her devastation over people's opinion of them if and when they find out that her son, Rasool, has agreed to let his wife, Soo, raise other people's children and not have his own biological children, except for one, who might turn out to be a girl and so unable to carry the family name.

A closer look at all three examples proves the roots of patriarchy and the females' centrality in maintaining the family's good name and honour (*aberu*). In example (1), the fear of others' gossip behind their back is what brings about the ultimatum (the narrative hook), which eventually compels Soo to accept an arranged marriage against her will. In example (2), Soo is forced to go back home, a decision that directs the story towards a shooting incident, in which Joe's

heroic character is revealed to the Rustins, and in turn leads to Ebrahim finding out that his rescuer is no other than his old enemy, Joe. In example (3), the only thing that holds Ameneh back from stopping the wedding is Rasool's confession that he is not going to keep his promises to Soo. If Rasool had the slightest intention of doing so, seeing his mother's reaction makes him more steadfast in his determination to breach the prenuptial terms. Moreover, the endangered *aberu* in turn expedites the divorce procedures, since Rasool's parents cannot risk having a bride like Soo as their daughter-in-law, and hence they finally give up on this longed-for marriage.

The impact of *aberu* on the lives of Iranians – as well as the lives of characters in this romance novel in particular – is not exclusive to the points mentioned in the examples above. Looking at *aberu* from a more holistic point of view in the plotline of *Yousef's Sooreh* sheds more light on how indispensable this cultural entity has been in most subplots interwoven into the main love journey. It is not just the life-changing ultimatum; it is the *aberu* in relation to the gossip behind Soo's back and her uncle Mostafa's lies that forces her to accept her cousin's hand in marriage. It is *aberu* as Soo's driving force and incentive when she plans a rescue operation to save her friend Tahmineh from a party, whereas the most foreseeable behaviour would have been to contact Tahmineh's family directly. But again having Tahmineh's *aberu* in mind (even among her own family members), Soo herself gets involved – a courageous extraordinary act which twists the plot in a way that leaves no doubt in Joe's mind she is the one for him. It is the same cultural element that holds Soo back from accepting Joe's suggestion to leave her husband, and not allowing Joe to proceed with his plan to propose to her inside the military van. It is again a female's family *aberu* which compels Soo to assist Joe in the rescue mission, a prominent rising action in the plotline leading to the revelation of Joe's true identity and making up the most dramatic turning point in the narrative: Soo falling in love with Joe. These are just some of the key examples of major plot-points driven by *aberu*. Lastly, Ebrahim's sudden dramatic decision to move his family away from Joe was solely because of the fact that the unruly youngster had become a threat to his reputable and devout family's *aberu*.

Depicting *aberu* for a Western audience was a challenge and I had certain considerations to keep in mind while crafting the novel. It often made the dialogue unnecessarily long, because I had to make sure this cultural entity is not only mentioned but also emphasised; whereas in a Persian novel written to an Iranian audience these extras are not necessary and could be cut back to a great extent. Moreover, at times I was compelled to create a heated argument where it would be appropriate and reasonable for the characters to remind one another of this cultural specificity, while in other more ordinary circumstances – within the context of Iranian society or books written in Persian – rules of *aberu* would be routinely followed and observed without anyone discussing or demanding them.

### ***Reflection of individualism/collectivism in Iranian migrant/diasporic literature***

The impact of Iran's collective structure has been much greater on Iranian writers – particularly women – than the word 'influence' can denote. It has rather suppressed and withheld them. There are critics who believe that the relatively late-blooming emergence of autobiographies and memoirs composed by Iranian women has not much to do with the genre in hand, but rather the cultural constraints that have held these female writers back (Milani, 1990; Paköz, 2007; Mannani, 2015). Milani (1990) in a book chapter called 'Veiled Voices' explains that 'its absence is perhaps the logical extension of a culture that creates, expects, and even values a sharply defined separation between the inner and the outer, the private and the public' (p. 2). She perceives this as 'one more manifestation of strong forces of deindividualization, protection, and restraint' (p. 2). This is also observed by Kamin Mohammadi when she is interviewed about writing her memoir, *The Cypress Tree*. She explains how *aberu* as a cultural consciousness was a barrier, holding her back at first:

'My family have been wonderfully supportive of me as a writer, but the whole *aberu* thing was an issue,' she says. 'It wasn't really them, it was me: it runs deeper in me than I realised. Of course, I didn't want to invade the privacy of others. But so often the best stories are invasive.' (2011, p. 2)

Although there are critics such as Mannani (2015) who believe that 'in a memoir, one's private life and public image do not and should not necessarily correspond'

(p. 67), there is ample evidence supporting the notion that certain cultural aspects have been – and still are – confining Iranian writers, even those living abroad.

The culture specific concern and awareness of I/C plays a great role in the way a writer designs the narrative in the context of a collective society. In *Yousef's Sooreh*, for example, if we consider the central theme of the story – which is the love journey of the protagonists Soo and Joe, and Soo's elders, the Rustins, appearing as the antagonist – the major conflict is the impact of these cultural barriers on the plot and characters. The Rustins with their affiliation as members of a certain social group cannot allow someone like Joe to marry their daughter. He is a total outlaw and an embarrassment, according to their and their group's standards. Their *aberu* is at stake. They cannot bear the disgrace and shame this marriage would bring to their reputation, and the consequences it would have on the Rustin family's name and future. Their loyalty to their social group and their concern about others' judgement takes the story to a strange divergent route that foreign readers unfamiliar with Iranian culture would find illogical, if not perverse. It is only when the Rustins see the extraordinary in Joe and discover his true character do they consent to his union with their daughter. By the same token, the Rustins' interest in marrying Soo off to her first cousin expounds the collectivistic ideology. In fact, the authorisation of interfamilial/consanguineous marriages in most Eastern cultures is another means to strengthen the solidification of family ties and in-group kinship and propinquity.

Soo's friendship with a Christian girl is another indicator of the impact of I/C on the inter-communal connections among Iranians. We read:

Soo rings a doorbell to a house and talks to a girl her age who gives her a carrier full of books and a goodbye hug.

Tahmineh standing aside can't believe her eyes and showers Soo with objections afterwards. 'The whole community knows those people are not Muslim. They are not like us. I can't believe you're friends with Christians or Jews or whatever they happen to be.'

Soo points out that the girl is a wonderful friend ... She and her family collected far more donations from their community for the victims of the

recent flood than any of their mutual Muslim friends did. ‘And I don’t remember them asking what faith the survivors had when handing them all those brand new blankets, clothing, and hampers of food. You’re right they are different. They are *way* better a people than we are. And what do we do in return? We often talk behind their backs and call them aliens and outsiders.’

Tahmineh apologises for her irrational and unfair misjudgement.  
(*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 13)

Tahmineh’s unreasonable prejudice towards non-Muslims, even those living in the same neighbourhood, speaks of these ties, and tendencies among the in-groups. Moreover, it represents the common attitude of ordinary Muslims, especially those living within the borders of Iran, towards believers of other faiths. Soo’s following remark, however, proves that although this is a widespread ideology and practice, it is in fact against the doctrines of Islam and not the way true Muslims think and react, hence drawing a borderline between these Muslims and the extremist hardliners. Soo then continues:

‘I thought you were a great fan of Parvin E’tesami’s. Haven’t you come across her famous poem on this subject?’

‘And which one is that?’ asks Tahmineh with an impassive face.

‘The one with the father telling his child that being a Muslim means honesty, leaving others in peace, and serving humankind; then the child replying that with those standards and descriptions, there is only one Muslim in the city, and that happens to be a Christian.’

‘Really? I’d love to read it.’

‘If you ask me, religions are all the same, with only minor variations. If we just concentrate on the commonalities and put aside the differences, any religion is able to make a good human. There are even those who don’t have religious beliefs but they are good people.’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, pp. 13–14)

This altruistic open-mindedness makes the Rustin family stand out among the Iranian Muslim majority. With the assistance of a third character, the cultural information has been embedded within the dialogue.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The different types of Iranian Muslims have been elaborated in greater detail on pages 11–15 in the introduction.

Another example is the following from Susanne Pari's novel, *The Fortune Catcher*. Early in the novel, the antagonist, Maman Bozorg, (in Persian, 'Maman Bozorg' means 'Grandma') becomes hell-bent on keeping the protagonist, Layla, away from her grandchildren for reasons that are rooted in her collectivistic ideology. Pari writes in the words of Maman Bozorg:

My two grandchildren would move toward their destiny, their *ghesmat*, with ease; I would be their guide. Soon they would realize what a perfect match they were for one another. But as the fates always prove: If you do not pay attention and if you do not always appreciate your good fortune, the *jenns* of darkness will sneak into your house.

And so came Layla ... Daughter of an infidel!

...

I knew the first time I laid eyes on her mother almost thirty years ago ... [that] she did not belong with a good Moslem boy like Ebrahim Bahari. (1997, p. 43)

Here, Pari presents visible signs of collectivism and how certain cultural components affect Iranians' behaviours, hence transforming the plots and skewing the narrative arc. Since this section of the novel portrays 1960s pre-revolution Iran, Pari's narrative highlights the fact that these behaviours and attitudes are all culturally rooted and have no relations to politics and/or the revolution. The mask after the onset of the 1979 Revolution is a by-product of this phenomenon and has a religious and political essence to it, whereas the socio-cultural mask has been a more perennial idiosyncrasy in Iranians, inseparable from Persian culture.

Both Dariush and Mariam, Maman Bozorg's grandchildren, have individualistic perspectives on life, especially due to the education they have had abroad and their contact with more individualistic cultures. Mariam has romantic feelings for her cousin Dariush, but he does not feel the same way about her. He has been in love with Layla since childhood and has no intention of marrying Mariam. Yet, their controlling grandmother does a great deal to make this happen. She is determined to keep them loyal to family ties and the social group she thinks they belong to, in order to maintain *aberu* and *zاهر* in the public eye.

She prevents them from forming any forbidden relationships with members of the other groups – Jews and foreigners in this case. Later, Pari shows how unreasonably potent and overpowering these collective convictions can be in Iran when Maman Bozorg herself arranges Dariush's draft into military service and war. This not only keeps Dariush away from Layla – and the child he does not know they have – but nearly costs him his life. The author is critical of this fanatic level of obsession with collectivism.

Even if the reader understands the lack of freedom of choice and practice of arranged marriages – which are still in force in some communities and nations, including Iran – the ancestry Dariush and Mariam belong to is too modern to show theirs as a representative of such families. We see how the I/C paradigm as a cultural entity impacts the causality rationale of a novel which will most likely lead to bewilderment, unless resolved by the author. Here, Pari's indirect and felicitous explanation of I/C doctrines in pre- and then later in post-revolution Iran serves a significance task, justifying the undeniable anomalies in the story.

Often throughout the novel there is more than one incident that requires a specific treatment. However, after the foreign reader gradually becomes aware and more accustomed to such cultural variations, the subsequent similar instances will not need to be accounted for in detail.

### **The patriarchal/male chauvinist nature of Iranian society**

Male dominance is more or less a common characteristic among Asian and Middle Eastern countries (see, for example, Baxter, 2007; Joseph, 1994; Khan, 2008; Kulczycki & Windle, 2011; Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987; Sadiqi, 2014; Wiggett, 2014). Iran being in this category has not been an exception in maintaining a patriarchal construct throughout its history (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008; Homa, 2015; Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Kandiyoti, 1988; Mahdavi, 2014; Moallem, 2005). Literature of diaspora narratives has indicated certain traditional arrangements, or rather a set of gender-segregated roles for women globally. The main and more common ones include: nurturing; considering men as the heads of the household and serving them; viewing labour not from the financial perspective, rather its affective side in domestic spheres;

attending to children's tasks and needs, to name a few (Hochschild, 1983; Komarovsky, 1964; Lopata, 1971; Oakley, 1974; Radway, 1984; Rose, 2004; Weeks, 2007). Ebert too confirms 'assertiveness, analytical thinking, ambition, and leadership' to have been previously allocated to men while 'nurturance, emotionality, and tenderness' were expected to be women's attributes (1988, p. 20).

Radway (1984) examines this in her book on women, patriarchy, and popular literature. In regard to women's role as caregivers, she states critically that this factual proneness 'is reinforced ideologically by the widespread belief that females are *naturally* nurturant and generous, more selfless than men, and, therefore, cheerfully self-abnegating' (p. 94). This inclination and proclivity for feminine charm and attention towards the household are believed to be in harmony with the inclinations of everyone else in the family, therefore, presumably, a woman willingly does what is required of her but this idealistic performance is extremely burdensome (Radway, 1984). In the aforementioned book, Radway's point of reference is not diasporic narratives or Iranian literature but popular literature in general; notwithstanding, gender issues in popular romance can be linked to those in Iranian diasporic narrative. Likewise, Mumtaz and Shaheed (1987) see patriarchy as a negative force which unfairly confines a woman's heed and consideration to her husband and children only. Uzma Aslam Khan points out the same tendency in her novel *Trespassing* (2003):

[T]here was an unspoken agreement between men: Woman was not a topic worth mentioning, unless she aroused them sexually. But Man was a topic women devoured from every angle. Dia was certain this was the most obvious yet neglected reason for their disparate positions in society: time. Women spent it on men; men spent it on men. (p. 94)

Bhanot's (2009) dissertation argues that romance narratives promote patriarchy and abusive behaviour by males. She states that dark romances encourage hostile sexism while Prince Charming romances encourage benevolent sexism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Sternberg (1998) believes that any story composed on the topic of love is always originated in the narratives of the romance genre authors have come across throughout their lives.

Some studies show that based on these love stories, the female gender may have learned to consider this type of aggressive and abusive behaviour ordinary and in fact romantic; hence women are often reluctant to oppose their own maltreatment (Fraser, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Wood, 2001b). This is particularly pertinent to most Iranian women who tend not to speak up or complain about abuse because they are led to believe that is the normal way men show their love and intimate feelings. In a self-persuasive way, they internalise the famous Persian slogan that ‘he does it because he loves me’. According to many feminists and experts in gender issues, there is a disadvantageous and detrimental side to love. One of the reasons why women have been surpassed by the male gender throughout history might be that while men delved into creating, exploring, and inventing, women were busy devoting their lives to loving them as their utmost priorities (Atkinson, 1969; Firestone, 1972). This is also the case even in the happiest of marriages. Iranian wives often feel not being loved back with the same degree of intensity that they love their husbands. Many leading feminists, such as Atkinson (1969), blame love for becoming an axle around which swivels the female gender’s oppression.

However, due to the complexity of the notion of love, it would be hazardous to draw any conclusions here and label love as a means of exploitation and maltreatment of the female gender. As Sternberg (1998) notes love is not the exact same conceptual entity to all individuals. It can fit into a range of definitions which become even more widely divergent when being examined cross-culturally. Teo, in her study of popular romantic literature, likewise states that ‘[d]ifferent peoples, cultures and times have different interpretations of romantic love’ (2017, p. 6). In intimate relationships, what works for one couple may not work for others. In Iran, for instance, love can mean any single one of the following or even the combination of all: devotion and loyalty, emotional and physical support, independence and/or dependence on the partner, peace and tranquillity, diligence and conscientiousness, altruism and philanthropy, fun and adventure, passionate physical intimacy, etc. Or it might be the mere ability to be free from the interference of the in-laws, for couples’ natal families are proven to be one of the most prominent causes of marriage break-ups in Iran (Mazaheri, Sadeghi, Nasrabadi, Ansarinejad, & Abbasi, 2009). As the need for love is

variable at an individual level, and differently perceived in different cultures, the cultural and individual differences will be indicated in the way it is represented in both research and creative work in terms of the specific contexts addressed. This is in spite of the case for the universality of passionate love argued in this thesis, which presents both culturally specific and universal norms.

This is where romance narratives play a crucial role. Firstly, as Sternberg (1998) also confirms, due to these cultural diversities when writing romance based in another cultural matrix, writers constantly keep in mind the culture-appropriateness and craft their writing within the framework of culturally-approved norms and standards; otherwise their love stories will be rejected by that culture. Secondly, as one of the many tasks of love stories, they discover logical basis within the nuanced perspectives of different couples across cultures (Fisher, 1987; Gergen, 1997). In light of the findings, one cannot emphasise enough the critical importance of romance writers' role and responsibility, and how mindful these writers should be of the thin line in between when designing their love stories. Whether their writing could unintentionally promote patriarchy or, quite the contrary, present various ways in which love can be a redeeming saviour – at least for the hero and the heroine – is an inevitable challenge.

Eastern definitions of 'love' make sense when we see 'love' as a processed entity – or a by-product – having had traumatic disfigurements by passing through the cultural filters, and patriarchy in particular. However, this does not mean that women who are confined to the cultural ethics of their societies do not know what passionate romantic love is, or what it can feel like. Seeing it from the feminists' viewpoint, celebrating life's pleasures equally between both genders has long been the utopian slogan for critical feminists, which is precisely what patriarchy is adamant to ignore and suppress (Radway, 1984; Modleski, 1984; and others). Therefore, it is not surprising why now even after decades of so-called feminist reformations in Eastern societies women still hesitate to freely express their longing for passionate love, and would rather define it with caution and cultural conservatism, as if it is a shameful taboo. It is interesting how, for instance, a woman's maternal love as an undeniable instinct toward her child is acknowledged and valued for forming a good bond between the two; whereas her

passionate love towards a possible lifelong partner is not considered an instinct and not regarded as a requirement for a happy relationship. Any mother must necessarily love her child but entering and continuing a love-less marriage is not considered wrong and unhealthy. If childbearing/rearing without allowing motherly love equals deprivation and denial of an instinct, so should marriage and living with a spouse without romantic love. And if passionate love is acknowledged as a general instinct common in all humankind, assigning cultural variations for a universal entity is senseless. As far as this research has explored, there is no difference in the meaning of passionate romantic love across cultures. This is directly mentioned on pages 31–32 of *Yousef's Sooreh* in the heroine's words to her younger sister about the meaning of love. Any alterations to the real meaning would be the definitions taught to women by the rules of patriarchy, rather than what their hearts desire instinctively. The same is true of the physical aspect of passionate love. This is reflected on pages 134 and 135–136 where the heroine is put under pressure for sexual intimacy.

As Foucault (1976/1978) rightly puts it, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (p. 95). With 'increasing abilities and rising expectations', Iranian women are fighting for 'greater employment opportunities, more political space, and an expanded set of rights' which is what the current government is either unable to provide or intentionally disregards (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2008, p. 24). This predicament in the current situation of women against patriarchy in Iran is what Monshipouri (2004) refers to as a 'gender conundrum' (p. 8). Hoodfar and Sadr (2010) best describe the entangled issue of women's hardship in Iran by stating that the post-revolution Iran is home to a 'dualistic state structure' in such a way that 'non-elected and non-accountable state authorities and institutions' have been given jurisdiction to supervise and lead 'the elected authorities and institutions' (p. 885). Where this pertains to patriarchy and becomes problematic is that most of the group of non-elected and non-accountable state authorities 'have not accepted either the primacy of democracy nor the premise of equality between men and women (or Muslims and non-Muslims)' (p. 885). These researchers believe that the problem with this gender/minority inequality 'has more to do with the undemocratic state–society relations that persist in Iran and less to do with the actual or potential compatibility (or lack thereof) of religious

traditions or practices with democratic principles’ (p. 885). Overall, as Moallem (2005) puts it ‘modernization and westernization neither challenged patriarchy in Iran nor changed it. Indeed, they merely divided patriarchy into hegemonic and subordinated semiotic regimes positioned to compete for control of women’s bodies and minds’ (p. 3). The data clearly indicates that women in Iran are still subject to victimisation by unjust rules of patriarchy.

### ***Familial roots of patriarchy and the mothers’ part***

In patriarchal contexts, in addition to greater physical power of the male gender, because of the preference of males over females from the very beginning, men automatically have grown entitled to dominating throughout their lives. Similar to many other social adversities, the roots of male dominance originate at home and not just from the father. Misogynistic ideologies are not specific to men. In fact as Khan (2008) states, ‘it is often another woman who discriminates against her own sex’ in the domestic environment (p. 51). In societies where the most significant value in a woman is her becoming a wife and a mother (Khan, 2008; Yamani, 1996), motherhood is synonymous with producing male offspring. The only light at the end of this tunnel for a woman who has been a victim of patriarchy all her life is her hope for the entitlement of benefits in her elder years through patrilineality. This means security and peace of mind through financial assistance of her son(s), also the subservience of her daughter(s)-in-law who are brought into the paternal household often at a young age and expected to offer their services to their in-laws (Mojab, 2005; Moore, 1998). As such, male children are preferred by both parents because they are considered profitable investments, a source of financial support for the family’s future, whereas girls are married off and sent to other households and thus are considered a financial waste and burden (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Khan (2008) also confirms that ‘boys are the future wage-earners and care-takers of the family, while girls are mere liabilities, to be shed through marriage’ (p. 51). To this end and to maintain the patriarchal structure and order of the household intact, it is mothers (or other female seniors) who have total control over younger females (Mahdavi, 2014) and discriminate against girls at home (Baxter, 2007). This discrimination can be reinforced in a wide range of severities such as spending less money on educating girls, if at all,

than on boys (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Yet, as it is still in practice in some South Asian countries, it can be as profound as feeding female children less often and only leftovers of males (Khan, 2008). This trend is evident in Iran as well. Regardless of how it is enforced, many researchers – including Shiranipour (2002), Ebadi & Moaveni (2006), and others – are of the opinion that unequal treatment of girls and boys starts from birth.

Nonetheless, as the more recent emerging generation of sons and daughters-in-law have started declaring their own nuanced aspirations and way of life, seeking liberty to break free from the traditional gender segregated roles, their previous generation, especially the mothers, feel betrayed and defeated in the process. As Kandiyoti (1988) puts it, ‘for the generation of women caught in between, this transformation may represent genuine personal tragedy, since they have paid the heavy price of an earlier patriarchal bargain, but are not able to cash in on its promised benefits’ (p. 282). Yet reports such as Shaditalab’s indicate a transformation in the condition of mothers and daughters as well as their relationships in Iran; ‘educated girls are defending their mothers from poverty, hardship, and domestic abuse, and power relations within the family are changing; the father is more often seen as a manager rather than a boss ...’ (2006, pp. 18–19). *Yousef’s Sooreh* implicitly lays the groundwork for such diverse cultural ideologies and gender roles to help the unfamiliar reader find some sense, logic and rationale behind these haphazard practices.

### *Namous*

Economic concern (expecting boys to become breadwinners of the household) is not the only cause of favouring sons. Regardless of the bio-anatomical factors, due to improper distribution of power in male-chauvinistic cultures, the female gender is more vulnerable and susceptible to harm and subject to victimisation, both by related and unrelated males, in domestic and public spheres. This is where *namous*,<sup>20</sup> another cultural concept exclusive to Bedouin patriarchal cultures, comes into play; hence in need of a brief introduction here. The closest equivalent term for *namous* would be ‘honour’ in English (Mojab, 2005, p. 215; Sadeghi, 2008, p. 1; Shiranipour, 2002, p. 39). However, the word differs in

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<sup>20</sup> Also written as *namoos*, *naamus*, *namus*, ...

lexical coverage, connotation, and applicability. *Namous* only pertains to men,<sup>21</sup> in a way that it is in fact a female's honour that belongs to her close male kin (agnates). As a noun, it is not an entity descriptive of a state/condition of a man per se, but one which is acquired by – and related to – all of the female kin a man possesses.<sup>22</sup> In other words, this special kind of honour is to be assured and maintained by celibacy, good reputation, and honour of all female members of a man's family, and in the same way, it will be damaged or lost if the women of his territory bring shame and disgrace to the family. A Muslim man who has *namous*, as explained by Zamir (1982), possesses real manliness, knightly ardour, and masculinity to 'protect the chastity' of females in his family (p. 138), and is idealistically encouraged to feel the same way about other women in his neighbourhood, community, tribe, and so on.

In Muslim cultures, misleading interpretations of Islamic doctrines have caused more religious concerns which go hand in hand with patriarchal rules, intensifying the restrictions and control of women. Patriarchal culture compels fathers, brothers, and sons (even uncles, male cousins, and grandfathers) to protect the name, honour, and dignity of the family by making sure women do not breach the outlined patriarchal laws (Joseph, 1994). A woman is expected to comply with the prescribed rules of patriarchy dictated to her and hence prevent the arousal of such violent behaviours legitimised by the society (Baxter, 2007; Chowdhury, 2015; Saleh, 2011). Baxter (2007) states that 'honor ideology, specifically as it relates to sexuality, is a hegemonic discourse as, in ideal terms, it establishes, reinforces, and idealizes males (and, to some degree, older women) as authorities' (p. 764). Some of the expected traits and required codes of conduct for Muslim women include: virginity, celibacy, self-restraint, modesty, withdrawal, obedience, solitude, privacy, tolerance, accepting inferiority, and unconditional selfless love, affection, and support. Likewise, Pereira (2002) names 'women's seclusion, invisibility, chastity, silence and subordination' as all working for the advantage of Muslim husbands because these characteristics are 'the standard currency by which men secure their honor and position in society' (p. 98). As also noted by Joseph (1994), 'women, through their modesty, are

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<sup>21</sup> For this reason in Arab culture 'ird' [*namous* in Arabic] is known as 'a man's honor' (AbuKhalil, 1997, p. 100).

<sup>22</sup> These include his mother, sister, wife, daughter, aunt, female cousin, and grandmother.

supposed to uphold family honor' (p. 54). This explains why Goldin (2009) defines *namous* as female 'chastity' (p. 87). A kinswoman coming into contact with unrelated men (either intentionally or accidentally) or becoming the victim of an offence by male outsiders would mean the loss of *namous*, a dreadful dishonour which means permanent damage to the family reputation in the community. As such, female kin are considered the cause of one of men's greatest fears.

These ethnographical findings and observations affirm that the male-chauvinistic nature of Iran and other Eastern societies has significant effects on the narratives which are based in such cultural contexts. For instance, an Iranian father whose daughter has been sexually assaulted might beat his daughter to death or even kill himself, because his *namous* in his collective community has been lost, which is – according to the culture – due to the daughter's negligence in keeping herself safe, out of reach, and untouchable. What is striking is that, similar to intimate-partner crimes which often go unreported (Bhanot, 2009), such incidents relating to the damage of *namous* too are often kept secret and unreported to safeguard the honour and reputation of the family, which hence leaves the perpetrator male unpunished and free to recommit the crime. This reaction from a father might stun a Western reader unfamiliar with the Persian culture and the role and gravity of *namous*. In such narratives, though the interactions between male and female members and their treatment of each other might be precisely according to the cultural norms, the foreign readers with less cultural awareness will more often than not be astounded to come across such conducts and interactions.

Another unintelligible yet prominent feature of a patriarchal family is that a certain behaviour or action by a male might be considered totally positive, and even courageous and necessary, while the very same deed by any female might be taken as the opposite: daring, impolite, disgraceful, shameful, bold, unethical, and immoral. For instance, similar to standards of eighteenth-century European culture where silence was almost always highly encouraged in females while men's oratory and eloquence were promoted globally (Rizzo, 2005), in contemporary Iran, the same norms and values are still in place. A writer needs to

implicitly lay the groundwork for such diverse cultural ideologies and gender roles to help the foreign reader find some sense, logic, and rationale behind these haphazard practices. There are different ways of achieving this in cross-cultural fiction. *Yousef's Sooreh* provides an example of an attempt to that end by placing Soo in a situation where she needs to appear in a male disguise to succeed in a daring rescue operation whilst at the same time being in desperate need of her zealous and enraged brother's consent and assistance.<sup>23</sup>

In the novel there are examples of discussions about where Soo can live, especially once she is in hiding, for example, with Joe's grandmother or Tamineh's sister. This is highly unconventional, and illustrates the unusual plight of the characters in these situations. The novel also emphasises the differing treatment of male and female against the norms of *namous*:

‘A dorm is only a temporary solution. What happens after you graduate? As a single woman you know you can't possibly get a place of your own and live alone. You'll never survive the slandering behind your back. Joe does it, because he is the master of all the free-spirited things you can name; plus he is a boy. Things are never as bad when boys do them.’ (*Yousef's Sooreh*, p. 236)

Divorced women cannot live on their own and need to go back to their parents' or grandparents' or uncle's or brother's (i.e., household of a *mahram*), even if they are financially independent and are able to manage their lives. There are other patriarchal habits which have turned into fossilised norms in Iran. For example, there is always the implied expectation that a man (or men) leads the way when walking in a co-ed group. The same is true of the expectation that when using public transportation, a man gives the window seat to his female family member while he takes the aisle seat.<sup>24</sup> It would be extremely awkward and rare to witness it the other way around. The patriarchal roots are evident here. A man is required to take precautions and always protect the members of the more vulnerable gender zealously for the sake of *aberu* and his own *namous*. Therefore, he acts as

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<sup>23</sup> This incident is on pages 69–73 of *Yousef's Sooreh*.

<sup>24</sup> In post-revolutionary Iran, the city buses have a rule of their own. The government requires men and women to board/alight the city buses through separate doors and be seated only in the designated sections which are divided between men at the front and women at the back, even if they are travelling as a family.

a shield, keeping the females away from possible other males, who might well be predators.

### ***Reflections of patriarchy in examples of diasporic writing***

To direct the discussion towards the impact of Iran's patriarchal structure on literature and writing, it's noteworthy that 'until the mid-twentieth century men authored almost all of Iranian literature' (Fotouhi, 2015, p. 143). Patriarchal norms and standards have affected Persian writing and writers alike. This is evident from the relatively late emergence of migrant Iranian women into the writing domain as well, particularly regarding autobiography and memoir where (as discussed earlier in the chapter) *aberu* as an extremely important cultural factor comes into play. Writing in English for a non-Iranian reader is not an exception either. In a story, the phenomenon of patriarchy and all that comes with it might convey the wrong message at first, making them interpret a different kind of relationship between the female and the male characters, whereas it is quite authentic even in the friendliest most intimate relationships to have highly submissive actions and dialogue from the females and quite authoritative and demanding ones from the male characters. It can also be the other way round, and just as natural to have a more power-neutral type of conversation behind closed doors, where the cultural mask is off and the male character's *aberu* and respect are not so much at stake as it would be in public.

A reader unfamiliar with the constructs of the patriarchal culture often has a hard time empathising and identifying with the characters in the novel and relating to the events. Readers tend to expect the rules of cause and effect to help them determine character's behaviours and lead the progression of the story. As such, certain cultural ideologies and practices remain illogical and unjustifiable to the reader. It is only after deciphering and unravelling these cultural peculiarities that the reader finds some rationale in why and how the events are occurring the way that they are in the story, and what makes the characters act in a peculiar way. Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (1985/2005) argue that we 'may be irritated by characters or descriptions which fail to match our common-sense expectations of what the real world is like'; noting 'a failure in realistic motivation' is upsetting (p. 35). They, however, believe that 'once we learn to

accept a new set of conventions' that is when 'we become accustomed to all kinds of absurdities and improbabilities' (p. 35). Understanding the foreign culture on which a story is based hence does a great deal in taking the cultural barrier away and helps in relating to the narrative. Along the same lines, Mandanipour (2009) states that 'to write a good story, we have to try to make sure that even characters who go mad have a rational reason for it'. He believes that not having 'logic and literary sense' is a feature of a 'weak story', making it 'seem as if all the bones in the story are broken' (p. 36).

The use of minor characters, especially young ones, is one way to tackle this issue since lack of knowledge or having minimum awareness is expected in that age group, and therefore the writer can easily feed culturally diverse information through this method. For instance, near the beginning of the novel, Soo literally defines 'love' to her younger sibling Sara, who is not a child but a fifteen year old teenager, and usually at this age Westerners have a good grasp of the word love. The reason for this chat between the sisters is not only to imply the taboo nature of 'love' in that context, but also to convey that it is not a familiar or commonly talked about topic among Muslim Iranians. The secretive daunting nature of this chat (at midnight with only the two sisters present), Soo's reluctance to talk about it at first, and Sara's request for more explanation by saying she is not a child anymore are all strategic ways of explaining to the reader how love and romance are defined and handled in Iran. The reader can easily distinguish the cultural differences, the social stigma, as well as the added difficulty the heroine will have ahead of her in this love journey.

The second method is stating the obvious, which is only possible during physical fights or heated verbal arguments. Homogeneous characters with the same nationality, ethnicity, culture, and alike are intuitively aware of everything their culture and religion dictate. It is only in conflicts that they remind one another of the obvious. As such there might be more of such incidents in cross-cultural novels. In *Yousef's Sooreh*, because of Joe's rough nature and his aggressive outbursts, this strategy came in handy several times without sounding too artificial. However, there is a fine line to tread as these outbursts also affected the rendition of the character.

Fiction is not an exception in becoming a means to reflect this cultural characteristic. Some fiction writers have had a brief and swift mention of male-chauvinism while others have written elaborately on it. In Seraji's *Rooftops of Tehran*, for example, we read how a guest who 'has taken the vow of silence' and 'is well known for his clairvoyance' predicts the future for Pasha's best friend 'that Ahmed will get married at a very young age, and will have three beautiful daughters. Ahmed says, "No sons? Then I'm not getting married." Everyone laughs' (2009, pp. 180–181). At this point in the novel, Ahmad is well introduced as a static and stable character with numerous positive attributes. He is funny, brave, strong, and a loyal supportive friend to the main protagonist, Pasha. Moreover, he is deeply in love with a girl, Faheemeh, and is counting every second until he marries her. However, Seraji shows that even characters with desirable personality traits can still astonish the foreign reader with signs of male chauvinism. Ahmed's character does not portray a villain, neither is he a misogynist; yet in spite of the superficiality and humorousness of the scene, his reaction to having three daughters and no sons overshadows the first part of the prediction: his early marriage which should be a jubilating revelation to Ahmed. Embedding this in the dialogue allows the naturalness and acceptance of this attitude in the Iranian context.

Along the same lines, in Chapter 1 of *Yousef's Sooreh*, we read the words of Khanom Jaan, the Rustin family's matriarch, who had wished for a female grandchild when her youngest, Ebrahim, and his wife, Shireen, married: ' "The boy [her grandson, Rasool] was nearly ten and had no female cousins ..." ' (p. 2). Other than her aspiration for a future consanguineous marriage between her two grandchildren, there would be no reason for such a wish in the Iranian context.

Later, in the narration of the arranged wedding between Soo and her cousin, we read: 'Among the non-stop dancers is her mother-in-law, Ameneh, with her repetitive announcement of a hopeful – yet near impossible – wish, asking God to grant the newlyweds seven sons and then a daughter with Soo's looks' (pp. 172–173).

Not long after, when Ameneh finds out about the prenuptials, and Rasool's agreement about adopting orphans with Soo, she attacks her son for his irrational

and unwise decision and nearly stops the wedding. She goes on that even if Soo has their own child, there is a risk:

‘And what if she has a girl? That’s the same as not having children. Rasool Rustin, the firstborn son of this dynasty, will end up an heirless old man with only a daughter, unable to carry on the family name. Is this the kind of future you’ve pictured for yourself and for us?’ (p. 184)

As another example the philosophy and perspective of Joe’s mother can be revealing. We read in the free indirect discourse of Jila to Tahmineh that, ‘Apparently his mother only had him to overcome the patriarchal pressures of not having produced a male heir, while his father was actually fine with two girls’ (p. 65).

As mentioned earlier, the misogynistic perspective at a deeper level is not exclusive to males and their behaviour. *Yousef’s Sooreh* depicts how a mother of two girls, who has a happy family, ends up losing her life for a son her husband did not even ask for, just so she could survive the inevitable cultural pressures and fulfil her fragile ego for achievement and self-contentment. Nonetheless, one thing to keep in mind is that despite what governs the majority of Iranian men, both Joe’s as well as Soo’s father in this novel portray feminist men, characters that are rare to find but still exist in Iran.

### ***Iranian women and sexuality***

Women’s sexual instinct is one area in which patriarchy has been particularly unbending and austere, and this is not merely applicable to historical times. Even though Islam acknowledges sexual desires and its fulfilment for both genders (Saadawi, 1980; Muhsin, 1999; Moghissi, 2000; Ali, 2006) in reality women are far from seeing this put into practice. Pre-marital virginity, post-marital fidelity, and abstinence in case of singlehood, separation, divorce, and/or widowhood have been unquestionable prescribed rules. Any violation has consequences since it would endanger, damage, or destroy *aberu* and *namous* (reputation of a woman as well as her male guardians, family, group, community, and alike). Although, these laws are supposedly applicable to men just as well, in practice it is in fact the females who are liable. In light of Islam’s impartiality, this tendency to

control women's sexuality could only indicate the cultural nature of such ideologies and conduct. Dealing with women's sexual desire is again one of the interdisciplinary cultural signifiers, sitting at the junction of Iran's collectivism (where it relates to *aberu*), patriarchy (where it relates to *namous*), and interactions among unrelated members of the opposite sex (which is discussed later in this chapter). This further shows how certain cultural aspects interrelate and also why 'virginity', 'fidelity', and 'abstinence' are of prime significance, in spite of the modernisation and ideological transformations which have recently taken place in Iran. In other words, these three as utmost virtues are requirements of Iran's collectivistic culture to maintain *aberu* as well as the requirements of Iran's patriarchal culture to maintain *namous*, at a more theoretical level. As a result, combination of these two (collectivistic and patriarchal considerations) has led to the emergence of the third cultural entity in a more practical sense: assigning special 'rules of interaction among unrelated men and women'.<sup>25</sup> However, up-to-date information from Iran provides evidence that nowadays such orders are only administered superficially. In reality, Iran is witnessing violation of such traditional cultural norms behind the scene, to which parents and society at large have to turn a blind eye. Fornication, surgical restoration of virginity, adultery, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases have been documented to be on the rise in the contemporary Iran (Babayan & Najmabadi, 2008; Hoodfar & Ghoreishian, 2012; Mahdavi, 2008; Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012; Karamouzian, et al., 2015; Sadeghi, 2008).

Mandanipour in his novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, has an implicit artistic approach in condemning the prevalent ideology of virginity in Iran. It is a common practice that 'diasporic Iranian writers engage with Persian poetry as a significant symbol of their cultural identity' (Fotouhi, 2012, p. 64). By the same token, Mandanipour does this by making a reference to a Persian classic love story in verse: Nizami Ganjavi's *Khosrow and Shirin* (1180/1975), which contains 'six thousand five hundred verses' (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 23), all of

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<sup>25</sup> This aspect is analysed later in this chapter on page 97.

which narrate an ancient love story between an Iranian king (Khosrow Parviz) and his love interest (Shirin).<sup>26</sup> We read:

This half-couplet could imply that no man has ever bitten Shirin's lips, or that her lips have never touched a man's teeth, or even that her teeth have never bitten a man's lips. Do you think there is any better way to describe a woman's virginity than to suggest that she has never experienced a stolen kiss?

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

(Mandanipour, 2009, p. 23)

He artfully shows patriarchal ideologies still governing Iranian men's attitude towards a woman, both as a spouse, and as a lover, although it is often futile and disillusioning. In another part of his novel he has a different approach to the same social predicament:

Sarah's virginity is a foregone conclusion, because according to Iranian values (traditional and intellectual), a girl who is neither married nor a virgin cannot possibly fall in love; she has been deceived by false love, has lost her virginity and must therefore become a woman of ill repute. Should her father or her educated brothers, who night and day chase after their non-virgin girlfriends, ever discover her secret, they will either drive her to suicide, or if they are truly fanatical, kill her. The law of the land gives them the right to protect their honor. (p. 56)

Here, the author explicitly, yet sarcastically, describes the cultural mental attitude towards virginity along with its direct relation to *aberru* and *namous*, and condemns the patriarchal penalties against feministic rights in the name of maintaining honour.

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<sup>26</sup> *Khosrow and Shirin* is one of five stories in Nizami Ganjavi's *Five Treasures* (1180/1975), also known as *Panj Ganj* and *Khamseh*.

In her novel, *The Saffron Kitchen*, Crowther (2006) presents patriarchy and the gravity of virginity in the character of her main antagonist, Maryam's father, who is 'a general in the Shah's army' (p. 100) in the 1950s. Over an accidental incident, rumours have reached Maryam's father about her allegedly spending a night with Ali, Maryam's secret sweetheart who is also her father's apprentice and errand runner. Despite her father's awareness of her innocence and chastity, he disowns her, making her leave Iran. Moreover, prior to her departure, he orders a virginity test done on her, and not just by their family doctor, but by a group of male military medical staff affiliated with his work. Here is an exchange between the family doctor and the protagonist, Maryam:

'Your father and I have spoken about the rumours,' he said. 'He knows you have explanations, Maryam, but you must realise damage has been done to your family's name and honour ... Your father is deeply disappointed, Maryam,' Doctor Ahlavi continued. 'He cannot look on you as a daughter any more. This can no longer be your home ... [First] you are examined to establish if you are still a virgin.'

... 'And if I am a virgin, I can stay here?'

... 'No, the damage is done. If you are a virgin, you must still go ...'

'But if I'm a virgin, I'm innocent. You will tell him I am innocent.' (pp. 99–101)

Doctor Alavi drops another bombshell, saying he will not be the one doing the exam. Maryam's father will have her taken to the barracks. 'He must restore his dignity and show that he will brook no weakness – not even from his own blood' (p. 101). Crowther makes it comprehensible how male chauvinism, hand in hand with the other two influential cultural features: *aberu* and *namous*, suddenly shatters a father–daughter relationship, making the parties show odd attitudes and behaviour, and forcing them to take unusual action. There is also another drawback which further problematises Maryam and Ali's situation. From the collectivistic perspective, an apprentice from the lower class cannot belong to the social group of an army general. Crowther further defines a patriarch in the words of Ali, who was not only severely beaten up but also lost his job over that incident. When years later, asked by Maryam's daughter, Sara, how he remembers her grandfather, Ali replies: 'he was a powerful man ... He was driven

by tradition and duty. He prized respect and obedience above all else. I think, for him, to be loved was to be feared' (2006, p. 260).

The indispensability of virginity and sexual abstinence for unmarried women is presented on a broad scale throughout *Yousef's Sooreh*, to ascertain that readers from other cultural backgrounds are made aware of the above-mentioned issues revolving around female chastity. Early on in the novel, Soo directly warns her friend, Tahmineh, about the risks of going into nonreligious mixed parties:

'[B]efore you know it, things can get out of control ... We are talking loss of virginity at the top of the list. You might even return home pregnant ... If your soon-to-be husband finds out you're not a virgin on your wedding night, you'll end up back at your father's home where you'll stay single for the rest of your life, living with everlasting shame and misery.' (p. 62)

The following piece from *Yousef's Sooreh* shows the degree of Iranian families' determination to keep their girls chaste, not only physically but also emotionally and psychologically. The simple philosophy was – still is – that 'if children don't know about sex, they won't have it'. That is the main reason why in Iran acts of physical intimacy are kept hidden from young ones. In today's Iran, the younger generation learns about matters of intimacy from other indirect sources from an early age, yet keeping this information hidden was much more easily achieved and common in old times. Many brides were taught about the wedding night no sooner than on their wedding day or just prior to it. This is also why in order to support the bride – who would be thrown in at the deep end without any or much familiarity with the concept of sex – a few female relatives used to stay with the newlyweds on their wedding night. This is not the case with Soo. Nonetheless, when she rushes back home, looking distraught by Rasool's prior request to be intimate with her, her female seniors realise it is now about time Soo heard it firsthand from them about sex:

Both her elders ... try to calm her down. They take Soo's despair and sorrow for her unawareness about physical courtship between married couples, thinking Rasool has made certain moves on her, which have frightened the naïve, shy girl.

...

‘My poor girl! It’s obvious your mother hasn’t yet had “the birds and the bees talk” with you, has she? Come sit with me. I remember the first time I was approached by your grandfather ...’

‘It isn’t that, Khanom Jaan. I’m not a two-year-old.’ (p. 135)

Iranian men’s viewpoint is also presented here, and the extent to which female virginity is sought in a male-dominated collectivist society. Even a man like Rasool, who knows his immaculate cousin, Soo, better and has had the dream of marrying her for years, does not hesitate to upbraid and criticise her family over this issue when he finds Joe in Soo’s maiden home shortly after her escape from the bridal chamber on their wedding night:

‘He [Joe] has done the unmentionable, hasn’t he?’ yells Rasool. ‘My God, you’re trying to cover up this disgraceful disaster by making him marry Soo because he has taken away her virginity.’

...

‘Regardless of whatever sinning has gone on between the two of them, I am willing to take her back and cover up this mess before this shame becomes the talk of town, but only if a doctor certifies that she is still a virgin.’ (p. 211)

There is also a reference to how the loss of virginity as a taboo was covered up by forcing the predator to marry the victim, so as to compensate for the adversity brought to the girl and her family.

## **Social interactions**

### **Routine and clichéd nicety: *Ta’arof***

With no precise equivalent in English or other Western languages, *ta’arof* is referred to as a phenomenon specific to Iran and Persian language. It is a very common socio-cultural behaviour, a type of dualism in communication and action, which can basically be defined as saying, or doing, or offering to do something pleasant and/or useful to/for others not so much as actually meaning it but rather to show your courtesy, politeness, affection, humbleness, and also to save face, because due to cultural codes most Iranians expect it from their

compatriots. In other words, it is being extra generous in giving compliments and offering help, goods, and services to others just to show nicety without actually meaning it. At the same time, it can also be done with genuine sincerity which further adds to its already complicated and often perplexing nature.

As a simple example, a young, fit neighbour's offer to give a hand to an elderly person can be acted upon; whereas when a pregnant woman with a toddler in her arms and a bag on her shoulders offers to do the same favour for the same person, it is merely a *ta'arof*. It is expected not to be taken at face value, and be declined politely by the addressee, unless further insistence is made by the addresser, showing his/her true willingness. Or if, upon receiving a compliment on one's beautiful shirt, the addressee offers to give the shirt to the addresser, it is only a cultural reaction of making a *ta'arof* to show niceness and affection. Such offers can only be considered earnest and sincere when there is kinship, close friendship, or an intimate relationship between the interactants (participants) – the only exceptions in which the parties can be frank in their expressions and actions. *Ta'arof* basically originates from the Persian ideology that any possible pain, inconvenience, and insult to the addressee should be avoided in what is conveyed in communication or interaction (Chehabi, 2003; Giudice & Norfolk, 2008; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011).

Literature shows numerous books, theses, and articles written on *ta'arof* both by Iranians, as well as non-Iranians who have either resided in Iran long enough to sense, absorb, and comprehend this behaviour's applicability or have had other means of acquiring in-depth knowledge of Persian culture. Iranians, or any individuals in general who are raised within the Persian culture and reside in Iran, are highly conscious of all properties of *ta'arof* and are morally obliged to deploy it in their daily interactions. Having said that, to Iranians who are at the same time conscious about not going too far with it to actually turn it into an untruthful statement or act, *ta'arof* is not as commonly, nor intensely, practised. Also, for Iranians living abroad *ta'arof* takes a different turn and does not exactly work the same. Migrant Iranians in diaspora – who are aware of the confusion it will lead to if used in a culture where the majority of people are not familiar with this social construct – have gradually learned to tone down this habitual

behaviour, if not abolish it altogether. Still, when considering other migrant Iranians who are in their own communities or in Iranian social gatherings, it is evident that this spontaneous hidden tendency manifests itself, albeit not to such degree as when interacting with peoples of other cultures. For example, one is expected to discern a great degree of *ta'arof* among Iranians celebrating their new year together, compared to when an Iranian joins his/her Western colleagues in a club.

### ***Reflecting ta'arof in migrant and diaspora literature***

Within the literary sources analysed for this dissertation – both fiction and non-fiction written about Iran – most Iranian and non-Iranian authors have, one way or another, come across *ta'arof* and deployed certain methods in dealing with it. I will present some samples of these writers' works and then concentrate my argument more on the Iranians whose texts possess more resemblance to the creative writing of this research, *Yousef's Sooreh*. *Ta'arof* impacts narrative as it covers the characters' true feelings, incentives, and identities, and hence affects understanding of characters. When writing a story based in Iran, a writer is confronted by this problematic cultural construct. To be true to the culture, Iranian characters are written with this prior knowledge and familiarity about all facets of *ta'arof*, such as when another character in the story is being sincere and when s/he is just *ta'arofing*, or the certain ways to handle an interaction with another character keeping in mind the obligation they have to this cultural convention. The foreign reader, however, is often unaware of this rite and cannot do what seems to be mindreading. How is one to indicate, for instance, which offers are genuine and which are not; which to be counted on and which to be considered just a sign of courtesy?

As it will be illustrated with common daily-life examples, writers – of both fiction and non-fiction – have found ways around this socio-cultural hurdle, by deploying certain writing strategies and methods. They have been able to both define *ta'arof* linguistically as an untranslatable word to non-Iranian readers, as well as manage its inevitable effects on all narrative elements, such as characterisation, plotting, and so on within their writings. Clearly, a cross-cultural text should be able to illustrate the nuances of social interactions. Some tend to

provide examples or give extra contextual clues to ease this. Others provide a precise and clear definition.

In *Abandon*, Pico Iyer's romance novel about Iran (published in the USA in 2003), he shows the norms of *ta'arof* by how the protagonists – two American lovers, John and Camila, visiting Isfahan and already familiar with this social code – decline the offer to have tea, until their host insists on it more than once:

At last they came to a small black door. The boy opened it, and then climbed up a dark flight of stairs – Isfahan again – to what looked to be a small, dark cell. From outside came the sound of argument.

“You will drink some tea?”

“No, thank you.”

“You would like some tea?”

“No. We're fine.”

“You will join me in some tea?”

“Thank you,” he said, registering the ritual of the three-part refusal, and the boy went out, returning very soon with three glasses of tea ... (2003, p. 350)

Iyer, who has composed this romance novel without ever being in Iran (Patrick, 2004), shows not just his accurate awareness of the Persian culture but also how indispensable it is for writers who write about Iran to bring in the widespread practice of *ta'arof* into narrative. It is clear how the absence of his explanation of *ta'arof* at the end would have negatively impacted the narrative. The popular audience would be left bewildered at why the tea offer was done not once but thrice, and also why the two visitors refused the offer twice and then at the end accepted it.

Coming across this particular feature of Persianness, Iranian diasporic writers too have had their share of dealing with *ta'arof* in their fiction and non-fiction corpora. This is how Tara Bahrapour (2007) explains it in her online article in *The Washington Post*:

Ta'arof, which involves both parties insisting they are not worthy of the other, is in constant play in Iranian society -- people refuse to walk through

a door first, cabdrivers refuse to accept payment as passengers beg them to, hosts must offer pastries even if guests don't want them, and guests must say they don't want them even if they do. (p. 1)

In this excerpt, Bahrampour has used the example method. By presenting some very common and prevalent instances, in which *ta'arof* is most often used in daily lives of Iranians, the meaning is conveyed without much effort.

Kamin Mohammadi in her memoir, *The Cypress Tree*, describes *ta'arof* in the attitude of the airport official, when she first steps into Iran after many years of exile:

I was apprehensive, even of the bearded man behind the counter, but contrary to my expectations these representatives of the revolutionary government were charming, not impassioned and angry but smiley and full of *ta'arof*, the elaborate Persian form of courtesy whose deciphering has dogged my life. (2011, p. 7)

Although Mohammadi does not offer an extensive clarification for the peculiar Persian word – and even admits to its complexity – the core meaning of *ta'arof* can easily be grasped with the help of her short yet subtle definition and the surrounding contextual signals, such as the positive adjectives used for the demeanour of the airport officer.

Susanne Pari (1997) uses a different method in her novel, *The Fortune Catcher*:

“... You look beautiful, Layla. Radiant, actually.”

“It's not polite to give false compliments, Amir. You picked up some bad habits in Iran.”

“I mean it.” He didn't smile.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you, then. Maybe it's the joy of motherhood you see.” (p. 361)

Pari, too, leaves out the word '*ta'arof*', yet indirectly implies the existence of such a ritual in Iran in the words of her protagonist, Layla. The above takes place when Layla – looking unfit, smelly, sleepless, and at her worst after her recent

pregnancy and delivery – hears a compliment from a so-called devoted and helpful family friend, Amir. To Layla, Amir is a dear childhood friend of her assumed-deceased husband's, as well as her means of escape from Iran after her husband's assumed death. At this point, which depicts the highest peak of dramatic irony in the story, Layla is still in the dark about Amir's antagonistic identity, his evil-minded psychotic attraction toward her, and all the vicious things he has done throughout the story to have her to himself. Even though she has recently sensed a one-way romantic interest from Amir's side, Layla does not feel close to him, nor intimate enough with him, to eliminate the presupposition of *ta'arof* from their interactions. She therefore takes his compliment as a *ta'arof* at first, hoping he does not deny it. Yet he does.

The analysis of this particular narrative segment has certain delicacies, due to the involvement of a few contextual and linguistic factors. On the one hand, Layla is hoping it is merely *ta'arof*, as she does not feel the same way about Amir and prefers to keep it that way. On the other hand, these two Persian characters have lived a great deal of their lives outside Iranian borders – in fact in this particular scene they are in New York. She thus knows they are not tightly bound to the habitual practice of *ta'arof* in their interactions, which is what Layla clearly indicates. Amir too conveys this by showing and mentioning his utter seriousness. These lead to Layla finally realising Amir's genuineness in his compliment. In this specific narrative, the writer has had a combination of factors to account for: 1) the duality of story context (Iran/USA); 2) the multicultural nature of the characters; and 3) the suspense of the story as well as dramatic irony. All these have influenced the craft of Pari's method in handling *ta'arof* the way she has.

Mahbod Seraji in his novel, *Rooftops of Tehran* (2009), describes *ta'arof* this way:

Doctor takes his glasses off and puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, speaking softly. "Has anyone ever told you that you have *That*?" I must look thoroughly confused. "You've never heard of *That*?" he asks, surprised.

I shake my head no.

“It’s a priceless quality that’s impossible to define, really,” he explains, “but you recognize it in the actions of great people.”

Showering friends and strangers with inflated but disingenuous compliments is a customary tradition in Iran called *taarof*, but looking into Doctor’s eyes, I don’t think he’s *taarof*-ing.

*Some great person I am, I think, as the heat of embarrassment is joined by the heat of shame climbing up my chest and neck, secretly desiring my friend’s fiancée ... (p. 29)*

In this piece, Seraji’s protagonist, Pasha, narrates a childhood event to a neighbourhood friend called ‘Doctor’ who finds Pasha’s reaction courageous and admirable, and therefore compliments him on that. Yet Pasha feels guilty because Doctor is engaged to Zari, the girl Pasha secretly loves. Seraji openly mentions the Persian word, ‘*taarof*’, twice and directly defines it in the narrative, leaving no ambiguity about what he or the unfamiliar word means. His use of focalisation technique, so that the popular audience can ‘see’ what the character is thinking, is an additional aid. There is also a certain subtlety in Seraji’s approach. Not only does he deliver a cultural entity, but also he implies how easy it is for someone familiar with the culture to distinguish between a genuine compliment and a *ta’arof*.

In *Yousef’s Sooreh* there are more than a few references to *ta’arof*.<sup>27</sup> In Chapter 1, its most basic element is introduced. Unless the generous offer is repeated more than once, it is not to be considered genuine or taken at face value. Rustin family’s youngest, the bold and cheeky Sara, however, is often under attack for her lack of conformance with the principles:

She is told a thousand times to wait until others do the *ta’arof* and offer something to her and even then she should avoid taking any unless it is offered to her more than once, especially in front of strangers; yet her lack of appropriate behaviour still boils her female elders’ blood. (p. 7)

On page 82, as the prospective groom’s mother and a senior, Ameneh knows she has every right to pass her opinion about Soo’s hidden prenuptial

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<sup>27</sup> *Ta’arof* is mentioned 11 times in *Yousef’s Sooreh*. See pages 7, 74, 82, 117, 121, 122, 128, 201, 220, 236, and 282.

conditions, yet she first asks for permission, humbling herself in front of others, which is another aspect of *ta'arof* in the Persian culture – or what Beeman (2014) calls 'getting the lower hand' (p. 59). Only then does she start talking, and to take the edge off the negative impact her main point might have on the listeners, she first starts with complimenting Ebrahim Rustin's family. She knows *ta'arof* must be observed; it would be rude and impolite to present a negative opinion about someone or something in an outright, direct, and abrupt way:

After asking for permission to talk, something she already knows she is entitled to, she starts with a long *ta'arof*, a courteous initial prologue to her speech by mentioning all the merits in Soo and her family, before getting to the main point. (*Yousef's Sooreh*, p. 82)

As a rule of thumb about *ta'arof*, any generous offer – whether in the monetary form or assistance – should not be taken seriously unless the genuine intention of the giver is proven beyond doubt. On page 117 of the same novel, we read: 'Ebrahim puts some folded cash in Javad's shirt pocket as a gratuity, which he is reluctant to accept at first, but after some *ta'arofing* he finally does.'

Interestingly, in Joe, whose unconventional behaviour and lifestyle breaks through and revolutionises all the routine and mundane principles in the novel, *ta'arof* does not exist. However, that does not make him any less likable among those who know his true character and his other ways of showing his valuable attributes. In the following, we read Joe's reaction to Ebrahim's genuine offer to pay him back for the damages he and his family have caused:

Ebrahim brings out a bundle of cash, but Joe refuses to take any.

...

To prevent further *ta'arofing*, he starts writing a blank cheque.

'Mr Rustin – and I'm not cashing that – do you believe that people have this dynamic ability to change ...?' (*Yousef's Sooreh*, pp. 122–123)

This awkward characteristic also shines through in Joe during the novel's resolution stage, after the main climax. Upon Soo's return from her hiding place, he declares his eagerness in having an extra quick wedding, unable to wait even one more day to have Soo as his wife. Yet, he adds that he understands how much

Soo is missed by her family, and as such she can go home with the Rustins afterwards, and stay with them for as long as they want, or until their wedding reception. Any Iranian would take his offer as a mere *ta'arof*, since it clearly contradicts his impatience in having Soo by his side immediately. Yet, later on once his wish is granted, Joe's explanation proves the genuineness in his initial offer:

‘[A]s I said, I don't mind if she goes home with you, and I never do *ta'arof*,’ says Joe.

‘We know, and that's very thoughtful of you, but with or without a future wedding reception, it wouldn't be right separating the two of you. We've decided that her home is where *you* are now,’ says Khanom Jaan. (*Yousef's Sooreh*, pp. 282–283)

Another aspect of *ta'arof* is indirectly exemplified in this novel by the interaction between Soo and her best friend Tahmineh. We read:

‘[Y]ou don't need work. If you stop wasting your gold and jewellery,’ she says ... ‘they are more than enough to cover all your expenses for a long while, years in fact.’

‘Please don't start on that again. I had to do what I did, and I'd do it again if I had to. Besides, since when is there any *ta'arofing* among friends and family?’

Soo has sold some of her gold jewellery and insisted on helping the Sabris purchase a washing machine and start building a shower room, the two essentials they could definitely use in their busy household. (p. 236)

Tahmineh and her poverty-stricken in-laws, the Sabris, have provided temporary shelter for Soo. Tahmineh's reference to Soo's unwise generosity is taken by Soo as a *ta'arof* to which she objects, because *ta'arof* is not expected to be put into practice among loved ones and close friends.

### **The expression of respect for one's parents, elders, and guests**

Similar to the rest of the cultural realities, which are closely interconnected, respect for parents, seniors, and elderly persons cannot be defined as a solitary

reclusive cultural entity either. Age is a distinguishing factor between more individualistic cultures and the more collective ones; that is, in the former, more value is given to youth; whereas in the latter, old age is of great eminence. In most Eastern and Muslim cultures, parents and elderly people are treated with higher degrees of respect (Fakhouri, 1989, 2001; Harris & Moran, 1996; Khan, 2008; Moghissi, 2009; Neuliep, 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 1997). In Iran, this tendency, on the one hand, is directly linked with the collective nature of Persian culture, as well as patriarchy and the hierarchical power distant framework (unequal treatment of individuals based on their social status); and on the other, it is associated with *aberu*, *namous*, socio-cultural mask, and more importantly with religion. Iranian culture – very similar to Chinese filial piety – entitles parents and elders to high levels of deference, recognition, autocracy, and superiority. There are four main reasons for such protocol, all of which are also evident in most Eastern Muslim cultures:

- (a) The fear of God's wrath (since any form of disrespect to elderly people is considered a sin according to Islam), and having faith in the sacredness of this arduous duty (Cheraghi, Payne, & Salsali, 2005; Moghissi, 2009).
- (b) Powerful inter-familial bonds between household members and extended relatives. This is particularly the case in Persian culture (Alizadeh-Khoei, Sharifi, Hossain, Fakhrzadeh, & Salimi, 2014; Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Moghissi, 2009; Sadeghi, Mazaheri, Motabi, & Zahedi, 2012).
- (c) The socio-cultural mask, the fear of losing face among others in the community, who expect this etiquette from members of their social groups (Alizadeh-Khoei, Sharifi, Hossain, Fakhrzadeh, & Salimi, 2014; Neuliep, 2014).
- (d) The elders' resourcefulness, wisdom, knowledge and experience, especially when it comes to cultural rituals and traditions (Harris & Moran, 1996; Moghissi, 2009; Rea, 1998), as well as their leadership and power to resolve and settle familial conflicts (Johnson, 2001; Limbert, 1987).

First, to examine the religious aspect, I refer to the mention of the child/parent (especially child/mother) relationship and code of conduct in the holy Qur'an. In many verses,<sup>28</sup> there are instructions to show love, respect, tolerance, obedience, and gratitude to parents. One is also enjoined to address them politely, e.g., not to say 'ugh' to them or reprimand them in their older years (Qur'an, 17:23), and to pray for them (Qur'an, 71:28, 14:41, 17:24), especially for mothers because of the hardships of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding they have endured (Qur'an, 13:14, 46:15). It is compelling how again another feministic side to the Qur'an is revealed, requiring more attentiveness and appreciation towards the female parent. It is also stated that one should be kind to one's parents, no matter what their faith is (Qur'an, 31:15).

I continue the discussion in a descending order, moving from the older, more traditional codes of conduct down to the recent modern ones. Courtesy towards an elderly person or a *rish sefid* (Persian for white-bearded/aged), as well as their inclusive presence in Iranians' lives, has been an inseparable ancient characteristic of Persian culture.<sup>29</sup> Iranian children are often reminded that one should be grateful for the time they are granted to share with elderly relatives because these precious guests will not always be with the family. Children from a young age are taught to love, respect and honour their grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, even elder siblings (Fakhouri, 1989, 2001; Hegland, 2006) regardless of their position, rank, education, social status, etc. Hegland refers to this as the main distinguishing factor between Persian and Anglo-American cultures (2006). Within the ranking order, while elder men have supremacy and lordship to all males and females lower in the hierarchy, elder women have authority over younger women and children (Mahdavi, 2014; St. Martin, 1999). As such, in elder males' absence it is the 'older matriarchs' who rule the households and require 'authority solely by their age and years of suffering' from the younger ones (Goldin, 2009, p. 110).

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<sup>28</sup> Qur'anic verses about parent/child conduct: 46:15, 31:14, 31:15, 29:8, 4:36, 17:23, 17:24, 2:83, 71:28, 14:41, 17:24, and 6:151.

<sup>29</sup> As indicated by Mills (2004), an identical terminology 'rish-safidan (elders, "white-beards")' (p. 302) is used in Afghanistan, a Muslim country adjacent to Iran with a similar language and culture. In the same vein, Kochkunov (2010) uses '(aksakal)' (Turkish for white-bearded) when referring to 'elderly persons' in Kyrgyzstan (p. 42), again a Middle Eastern country which used to be a part of the ancient Persian Empire, whose language is still spoken in many provinces of Iran, and thus has close cultural resemblance to Iran.

As children grow up, this obligation towards elders implies much more than mere politeness and good manners. Therefore, unlike many Western cultures in which youngsters in their late teens are expected to leave their parents' home freely and start an independent life, Persian teenagers are expected to become more dutiful in maintaining their contributions and assistance to the paternal household they will always belong to. This way of life has its advantages and disadvantages. Through these stages in a child's life, elderly relatives (particularly the paternal side) or parents (if elderly people are absent) are the decision-making headquarters of the family who do the planning, have unquestionable control over every family member and are the voice of authority (Khan, 2008; Limbert, 1987). As an example in a fictional text, in *The Fortune Catcher*, Pari illustrates this power in an elderly character: 'I have always known what is best for my children and for my grandchildren' (1997, p. 40). She adds that 'I would not give up my influence over the members of my family. This would be like sending them into purgatory' (1997, p. 60). Rebellious children who do not stay loyal to their seniors and responsibilities are treated as infidel outcasts. This, as Neuliep (2014) indicates, is a total disgrace and taboo for any individual, a label no one can afford to live with, in a collective social network. Neuliep adds:

The "face" is a concern because if not properly maintained, it will bring disgrace to the family. The "face" is recognized in many ways. It is present during all social gatherings; the elderly are always treated with respect because the host and his sons must save their "self-face" by properly making the elderly feel comfortable. (2014, p. 79)

The powerful authoritative control over the younger members of the family or group resembles a dictatorship which does not merely have an impact on their familial life. It goes beyond that to even influencing their personal and private lives, often as far as the elders (or parents) choosing the kind of education and profession for the young generation; the type of people they become friends with; who they marry; how to treat and discipline their spouses; where to reside; what to name their children, how to raise them, and even what ideologies and opinions they should have (Limbert, 1987).

Moreover, because of the elders' higher position in the collective hierarchy of power, as long as the elders (especially the paternal grandparents) live, parents' authority over their own children comes second, if not third or less. Even from a legal standpoint, in Iran if the child's father dies, paternal grandparents have custodial priority to the child (Pari, 1997). In *The Fortune Catcher*, Pari (1997) mentions this in the voice of Maman Bozorg, a widow left with two young sons: 'My husband's parents believed in my abilities so they did not take the boys, as they had a right to' (p. 41). As one of the downsides to such cultural apparatus, in her autobiography, the feminist Indian writer Ismat Chughtai has this to say to her sister:

Following the orders of another human being I don't think I'll be able to tolerate that, Ala Bi. I have spent my life protesting against the tyranny of elders. I want to make my own way in life. The very idea of becoming an eastern, virtuous wife fills me with loathing. (2000, p. 76)

Besides, constant proximity with family and relatives can become overwhelming for adults and cause among other things psychological friction and interference in couples' private lives. Studies conducted on Iranian couples show that familial meddling and intrusions are currently some of the top reasons for divorce in Iran (Mazaheri, Sadeghi, Nasrabad, Ansarinejad, & Abbasi, 2009). Pari again portrays this in the voice of the same elderly antagonist in *The Fortune Catcher*. She shows her disappointment in moving to another suburb where she is no longer able to interfere in the lives of her children as much as she desires:

I was frustrated. In my old house, I had merely to look out my window to see what things were going on at the homes of my sons. But now I had no such luxury. I was forced to rely on my servants as spies. (1997, p. 58)

She adds:

Children cannot be brought up properly without fear. How is it that no one understands this anymore? ... And while I watched these sickening foreign ways stream into the souls of my grandchildren, I saw our noble traditions leak out of their parent's spirits. (p. 59)

In contemporary Iran, the power of traditional doctrines – particularly when it relates to decision-making by the seniors and elderly people – has loosened to a great extent over the decades. However, it is still viewed as the more idealistic and dignified way of life by both the old and the new generations. It is plausible that the elders would prefer the old strict framework, since they, as Kandiyoti states, have been cut in between the old and new generations, and have missed out on the due advantages of both youth and elder eras of life (1988). For the young ones, it is mostly their fear of God and public humiliation (loss of *aberu*). In addition, this is mutually beneficial for both sides, an indispensable factor in a collective social network. Muslim Iranians believe in an old proverb: *you give with one hand; you receive with the other*. Elders in return provide such services as free child-care, emotional support and guidance (Limbert, 1987), free accommodation and financial help even after children marry (if the elders are well off). Nowadays, individuals who try to show their noble and perpetual adherence to the traditional codes of respect, decency, and loyalty to their elders still continue, as a clichéd formality, to run things by their elders or ask for their consent on different family matters. Yet, this act of humbleness from the new generation, in spite of it being greatly appreciated and approved by the elders, is taken as a mere *ta'arof*. Elders know they should step down and leave it to the descendants to have the final word, especially when it relates to running the younger generations' own lives and that of their children.

Having said that, unlike what is narrated in some Japanese mythological folktales about taking elderly people to some deserted locations in the mountains and leaving them there to die (Barrieses, 2015; Luo, 1998), review of the literature for this section shows that such practice has not been a part of Eastern culture and traditional rituals. Due to strong family bonds and also the lack of any public aged/senior support services from the Iranian government, care for and assistance of family elders, both physically and financially, is still the children's responsibility. It is mostly the females at home who carry out the actual domestic care for the elderly relatives (Chughtai, 2000; Khan, 2008; Mortazavi, Pedhiwala, Shafiro, & Hammer, 2009) while males – or the elders themselves – provide the financial means for their expenses.

In her novel *The Fortune Catcher*, Susanne Pari's portrayal of the grandmother (Pari's main antagonist) exemplifies this cultural point triumphantly and elaborately. Maman Bozorg is a wealthy widow with only one child (a son) – the other son has passed away – and two grandchildren whom she is determined to force into marriage. As the matriarch and the voice of authority, her manipulative, obsessive, and fanatical ways to maintain her culturally-entitled control over everyone in the family brings sudden shifts to the narrative. This is skilfully interwoven into the romance plot. A great degree of cultural and traditional information is given through the voice of this elder.

[M]y Dariush left me to go to that university in America. This was the summer I felt as if I had lost my power to manage our family; I was failing my duty. It was also the summer in which Katayoon [daughter-in-law] began making noises about enrolling Mariam in a Swiss boarding school. Forgive me, I thought Allah had abandoned me, and I was so angry I beat my favorite maid. I thought about my right as a paternal grandmother: I had the final word; I could insist that Katayoon give the child to me ... the girl needed my way of straightening her out. (1997, p. 61)

Even towards the end of the novel when her granddaughter gives up trying to win her cousin Dariush over, and refuses to come between him and his wife, Maman Bozorg still continues full speed with her plan: 'Mariam must not become a threat to my plan, to her own future. I must have a serious talk with her. How did this happen? I never had difficulty taming that child. She was afraid of me, respected me' (p. 299).

The elders' influence on the characters, and hence the plot line, is an inseparable part of *Yousef's Sooreh* throughout. This cultural norm is presented with the help of exposition, and as early as Chapter 1, in Ebrahim's queer behaviour and endearments towards his mother, Khanom Jaan, nearly ignoring his wife and children and going straight to her first as soon as he returns home from work:

Ebrahim walks to his mother and after the exchange of many warm greetings full of respect and courtesy, he kisses her hands and sits beside her.

...

‘... You’re the crown of our heads. May I be your sacrifice and not see the day in which you are not around,’ Ebrahim continues with the well-known endearments as he kisses the elder’s hands again to prove his humility, affection and respect. (p. 7)

Code of conduct with elderly persons is also manifested when Khanom Jaan’s anguish about Soo’s future has Ebrahim set that life-changing ultimatum for his daughter, which is used as the narrative hook at the onset of the novel. This cultural entity’s strength and depth go as far as restricting and disarming not only the youngsters but also even other subordinate adults in the hierarchy, so much so that Soo’s own mother, Shireen, has to step aside and hold back her own opinion in the presence of the two elders: her mother-in-law and her husband. We read in Khanom Jaan’s words to Shireen:

‘One day when Salman has a family of his own, and you feel the responsibility on your shoulders towards his wife and children, you will understand. Please let me have this talk with Ebrahim and go and tell Soo to join us in five minutes.’ (p. 8)

In a polite and persuasive way, the matriarch asserts her authority in making decisions for everyone in her son’s household, fully self-assured that her adult son will not overrule his mother’s words. During the resolution phase of the novel, it is also Khanom Jaan whose opinion Ebrahim asks when faced with Joe’s unexpected request to marry Soo without delay. However, there is a twist at the end to prove that the familial connections are not always as black and white as they seem. The interplay of the cultural and religious forces and their impact on these bonds can be surprising:

Ebrahim turns to his wife but only from a distance, and without much eye contact. ‘I know you hardly ever pass any comments when my mother and I are present, but this is extremely important, and I don’t want you to feel left out. It wouldn’t be fair to you. After all you’re her [Soo’s] mother.’ (p. 278)

Positioned somewhere in between religion and culture, and obliged to uphold both, Ebrahim Rustin’s God-fearing characteristic does not allow him to always

stick with the norms. His religious beliefs compel him to treat his wife with fairness.

Another example is Joe's bold request of Soo's elders, during the novel's resolution leading to the story's falling action:

'It's entirely up to you, but do we need all those traditional formalities, ceremonies, and conventions you just finished no longer than five days ago? ... Of all those phases, what we really need is the religious marriage, and now that you as her elders are present, why don't we have it done right now ...?' (p. 277)

As his prospective partner in life, Soo is the one to be addressed by Joe, yet the popular audience will have enough familiarity with these cultural barriers by now to make sense of why he asks her elders, instead of her. Besides it shows the strong bond and closeness between the couple, in spite of all the religious and cultural obstacles. He knows Soo too well to assume any objections from her side to what he is proposing. Moreover, had it not been for the presence of all Soo's elders, and especially Khanom Jaan, Joe would have never made this request, for he knows Ebrahim Rustin is not a man to turn his back on his mother and make decisions without his elder's consent.

### ***Hospitality and guests***

As proclaimed by Jacques Derrida (2002) in a more global sense, 'there is no culture that is not also a culture of hospitality. All cultures compete in this regard and present themselves as more hospitable than the others. Hospitality—this is culture itself' (p. 361). In fact, without hospitality there would not be migration. Yet, considering this as more of an intracultural ritual, Persian culture's code of conduct regarding hospitality towards guests is very similar to its code of treatment of elders and elderly seniors in terms of exaggeration and extremity. *Mehman navazi* (Persian for honouring and welcoming the guest) in the best way possible has been an omnipresent part of Persian heritage. This tendency is not exclusive to Iran, rather a common shared tradition widespread among most Middle Eastern nations (Shirazi, 2005).

Iranians are well-known for their magnanimous hospitality toward visitors and guests. There is unanimous consensus on this by other commentators as well as experts in ethnography, such as Beeman (2014), Giudice and Norfolk (2008), Izadi (2015), Javidan and Dastmalchian (2003), Johnson (2001), O'Shea (2000), Sharifian (2005), Sharifian and Jamarani (2011), Shirazi (2005), and St. Martin (1999). There is a famous saying in Persian that '*mehman habibe khodast*' (a guest is God's beloved friend). There are also verses in the holy Qur'an (4:1; 2:215; 2:83; 16:90; 2:27; 13:25; 47:22–23) and other hadiths documented from the sayings of the Prophet and the Shi'a imams, in which people are warned not to sever kinship relations and are urged to do *seleye rahem* (Persian and Arabic for maintaining kinship ties) to keep family relationships and visits with relatives strong and steady. Muslims are also enjoined by religion to be generous in almsgiving (Qur'an, 57:18).<sup>30</sup>

### **The rules of interaction between unrelated members of the opposite sex**

This cultural specificity is, for two reasons, the most prominent of the rest. First, is its direct link to one of the major components of this research: genre of romance in Eastern societies – more specifically, in Iran. Second, is that when dealing with opposite sexes (mostly because of religious concerns), regardless of all the other existing cultural factors so far examined, it is only these specific codes of the participants between unrelated members of the opposite sex (henceforth referred to as IUMOS) that dominate the interaction and thus overshadow and possibly contradict all the rest. I will illustrate this point before moving on with the discussion. For instance, when contextual circumstances require application of *ta'arof* or when the rules of guest/host are about to come into play between an unrelated man and a woman, the participants are expected to avoid such interactions and breach the common cultural practices of *ta'arof* and guest/host. In fact they will be shunned and shamed if they do not, often to the point of sinning. For example, if a woman alone at home invites an unrelated man

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<sup>30</sup> Due to the limitation of length, and also because in the sources employed for this study (and in *Yousef's Sooreh*) I did not come across any significant issues which would relate to 'hospitality and respect towards guests', this section has been omitted from this discussion. For more information on this Persian cultural concept and its roots in religion see Batmanglij (1992), Baxter (2007), Chehabi (2003), De Bellaigue (2012), Kochkunov (2010), Peters (2001), Qur'an, 57: 18, Sobh, Belk, & Wilson (2013), and Yamani (1994).

over as a guest, and they use all the niceties of *ta'arofing* in their communication, they have sinned. That is how contradictory, yet crucial these rules of IUMOS are. No doubt, modernisation has softened these rigid rules, especially in more urban (metropolitan) areas where emergence of Western codes of conduct are more prevalent, but nonetheless the traditional parameters of IUMOS are still in place and expected to be followed.

The only exceptions to the application of these rules (IUMOS) are people who are one's *mahrms* (Persian and Arabic for close blood relatives of opposite gender) as well as children under the age of puberty, and people of very old age.<sup>31</sup> Literature shows the applicability of this policy and more or less the same definitions having been deployed and indicated in the works of other researchers, such as Aldebyan (2008), Kasravi (2001), Mandanipour (2009), Mortada (2003), Nafisi (2003), Noland (1983), Pooremamali, Eklund, Östman, and Persson (2012), and others. As stated by Pooremamali et al. (2012), 'a mahram is an unmarried kin with whom sexual intercourse would be considered incestuous ...' (p. 331). They add that '[i]n Islamic normative tradition sharia has classified opposite-sex relationships within two categories: Lawful mahram and unlawful na-mahram and has developed rules for how men and women may associate in daily life' (p. 331).

The oriental codes of how men and woman should treat each other and interact with one another are rooted in culture (and tradition), in religion, and in some societies such as Iran, in politics as well. Some Islamic governments, Iran included, have toughened the already strict cultural rules of IUMOS by institutionalising certain misinterpreted, tampered, and distorted religious instructions for their own political intentions and objectives (Mernissi, 1975). This has led to corruption, decadence, and millions of unhappy civilians,

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<sup>31</sup> These individuals are mentioned in one of the Qur'anic verses (24:31). Basically, the spouse or blood-related members of the opposite sex (except cousins and their children to whom marriage is permitted) as well as children-in-law, the step-children, and the spouse's parents constitute the group of *mahrms*. In other words, they are 'religiously permitted men' to a woman (Mahdavi, 2012, p. 357). For a woman, *mahrms* are her husband and all those male relatives she cannot marry, e.g., son, brother, father, grandfather, blood-related uncle, sibling's child, son-in-law, and step-son. The opposite gender of the same relatives comprise the *mahrms* for a man, such as, daughter, sister, and mother. Those who fall outside this category are called non-*mahram* or *namahram* (Persian equivalent for non-blood related) to whom the rules of IUMOS apply. They are 'those with whom marriage is possible under Shari'a rules' (Kasravi, 2001, p. 57).

particularly women. As is most often the case in patriarchal societies, women suffer more severely than men do on the basis of codes of IUMOS (see pages 62–72 for further discussion). The mere core of these laws is based on the ideology that everything about members of one gender is by nature sexually appealing and arousing to the members of the opposite gender; therefore, any sort of action and behaviour which would arouse sexual attraction between a man and a woman as well as any communication and contact between the members of the two genders who are non-*mahrams* must be avoided or kept to the minimum. This is most needed to keep families intact, to keep this instinct under control, and the society ascetic and pure. Of course, since Eastern societies tend to be governed by patriarchal ideologies, it is the female that needs to make the most effort and sacrifice to be unnoticeable, unavailable, and out of reach in the public and social spheres. These codes, briefly defined below, can be categorised as codes related to: (a) verbal exchange and eye contact, (b) proximity, (c) physical contact, and (d) behaviour and public attire.

#### ***Codes related to verbal exchange and eye contact***

Based on these codes *non-mahrams* should best avoid verbal communication and eye contact, but since these are practically not possible, they must be reduced to a minimum. According to Kasravi (2001), ‘many conservatives look down upon unmarried youth who converse without their parent’s supervision’ (p. 57). Mandanipour (2009) in his comical tone states that ‘in Iran there is a politico-religious presumption that any proximity and discourse between a man and a woman who are neither married nor related is a prologue to deadly sin’ (p. 8). A reference is necessary here to the significance of ‘silence’, both for its implication of non-assertiveness and submissiveness such as ‘reticence’, ‘patience’, and ‘endurance’, as well as its literal meaning ‘abstaining from verbal communication’. In any case, and inclusive of all its meanings, silence is an old-time attribute highly desired in a female in the Eastern societies. I need to first make a distinction between women’s silence (inclusive of all its multifaceted meanings) in the private domestic sphere as opposed to women’s silence in public social settings. While both are the firsthand products of patriarchal doctrines as a means to control and suppress women, the latter is twofold, as it is also the result

of the codes of IUMOS. In other words, a female's self-expression at home is viewed as her violation of male-dominance and subordination rules, whereas in public, in addition to that, it is also viewed as her disgracefulness, promiscuity, provocativeness, and willingness to reveal herself to non-*mahrams*. In her investigation of how there is a sudden flood of previously untold stories, memoirs, and autobiographies by unheard female voices within the realm of post-revolution diasporic literature, Milani (1992) pinpoints the element of 'public silence' as a 'convention' for Iranian women (p. 46). As well as its impact on literary production, this silence can lead to other adversities. Many sexual crimes such as incest, as well as taboo relationships remain hidden and unreported, due to the obligatory adherence to the parameters of collective society, especially maintaining face and honour (*aberu* and *namous*).

In general, the major methods of portraying the codes of IUMOS in *Yousef's Sooreh* has been characterisation and then by means of using a third minor character, and at times via setting. Codes governing the verbal contact are implied mostly through Soo's personality and also occasionally through other devout characters' behaviours and actions. In light of Soo's reserved and religious nature, there are plenty of examples throughout the accompanying novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*, where different routes (direct dialogue, action, and/or other techniques) have been taken to point out these cultural codes:

- (1) 'I'll have to repent for talking to a *namahram*, but some things have to be said. ...' (p. 33)
- (2) '... I only came to leave this note for you.' She [Soo] throws the note at Joe and heads upstairs. (p. 55)
- (3) The girls exchange glances, and Tahmineh tries to leave. 'I'll just be upstairs.'  
'I'm coming with you,' says Soo.  
'This won't take long.' He [Joe] blocks their way, still looking at Soo.  
Soo pulls Tahmineh's arm and stops her. (p. 75)
- (4) Respecting their need for privacy Shamsi excuses herself to head inside, but Soo asks her to stay. She is dumbfounded, yet complies ... (p. 249)

- (5) Shamsi looks just as uncomfortable to be present. She clears her throat and again attempts to leave, but Soo presses on her shoulder and asks her to stay just a bit longer. (p. 249)

Example (1) is Soo's first and direct speech to Joe about the codes of verbal communication, reminding him that although other girls might not mind it, she is very much observant of such rules. There is also the indication that if the speech is absolutely necessary it is allowed by culture as well as religion. In example (2), her writing a note to Joe shows, through action, her lack of interest in talking to an unrelated man. In example (3), this is done again by the use of a character's action: Soo pulling her friend's arm and stopping her as an indirect way of conveying this code. In examples (4) and (5), after one of the climaxes in the novel, it is fully understood why Soo is asking Shamsi, one of the carers, to stay while there is a private conversation between her and Joe, hence no further explanation of this action is provided at this post-climax phase in the novel. The character's action speaks for itself.

Moving on to the eye contact, as a basic rule, as Nafisi (2003) states, '[a] Muslim man should not look a woman in the eyes' (p. 124), which is also true the other way around. Restricting non-*mahram* men and women from looking directly into each other's eyes or staring at one another is greatly stressed. There is also an old-time saying that, *first the eye sees, then the heart desires* – hence to save hearts, it is best to restrain the eyes. It is said that the best way to avoid committing a sinful look is to always lower the gaze and keep eyes on the ground in the presence of a non-*mahram*. This is a direct order to both men and women in two consecutive Qur'anic verses (24:30 and 24:31). An accidental and unintentional exchange of look is permissible, but any other subsequent – and obviously intentional – eye contact is a sin. However, this code of conduct, although often violated, has only moral and religious bases. It is not a law for which the wrongdoer can be prosecuted if violations occur, unless in extreme cases. However, as Mandanipour (2009) states in *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, in which there is often overemphasis with the help of his satirical humour, 'an Iranian boy and girl cannot simply stand in the street and stare into each other's eyes; chances are the patrol from the Campaign Against Social Corruption will arrest them' (p. 41). Crowther (2006) in *The Saffron Kitchen* refers to this

code in the interaction between the protagonist Maryam and her suitor, who her father is forcing her to marry:

[I said] that the man had looked straight past me and that he must be rather rude not even to look at me when he wants to marry me. This annoyed my father. He said it had been a sign of respect to avert his eyes, and that I knew it. (p. 45)

In addition, Uzma Aslam Khan's novel, *Trespassing*, shows the resemblance of the codes of IUMOS throughout other similar Eastern cultures as well. The following is an excerpt from a Qur'an recitation gathering in Pakistan held for the passing away of the character Daanish's father. It is here that the two protagonists Dia and Daanish first see each other:

The men sat apart. Daanish snaked toward them, passing the girl Nissrine, her mother, and a friend of Nissrine's called Dia. She [Daanish's mother] was pleased to see Nissrine did not make eye contact with her son, but dismayed that the other girl examined him quite boldly. Even Pakistani girls were like that these days. (2003, p. 84)<sup>32</sup>

As mentioned earlier about the rules governing verbal exchange, the codes of eye contact are just as prolifically brought into *Yousef's Sooreh* when the characters who are unrelated members of the opposite sex are placed face to face in the narrative, and especially the two protagonists. There is always an indication of these codes whenever Soo faces Joe. The first occasion and a few other major ones are:

- (1) [H]is face becomes transfixed the second his big blue eyes meet the mystery girl's.

Soo looks just as transfixed and frozen. She turns her head to the other side, away from his petrifying stare, and starts breathing heavily. 'No, this can't be Joe. Please God, let it not be him,' she whispers to herself. She doesn't look back at him ... (p. 24)

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<sup>32</sup> This incident is thoroughly analysed on pages 113–114.

- (2) [T]he older officer ... approaches them, all the while taking his time to check Soo out with his piercing stare. Soo pushes her sunglasses back on. (p. 20)
- (3) Noticing Rasool's constant stare at her face and body, she drinks a full glass of water all at once and spills some of it on her veil. (p. 133)
- (4) His thick wavy hair has grown surprisingly longer than expected in only three weeks since she last saw him. She lowers her gaze. (p. 87)
- (5) And except for a few exchanges of grave looks with Ebrahim, his eyes are on the ground, being considerate of the religious household and the unrelated females around. (p. 201)

On the first four occasions, these codes have been brought into the narrative implicitly through the heroine's voluntary or involuntary action. Soo's discomfort can be sensed when others violate these rules and cross the boundary – as in examples (1), (2), and (3), as well as her guilt and regret when there is danger of her breaching such laws herself – as in examples (1) and (4). Example (1) is particularly emphatic about these codes, given that this is the first ever eye contact in the novel between the hero and the heroine. As shocked as Soo is to have seen her father's enemy after ten years, she does not stare back at Joe or ask him whether he is who she thinks he is, and just waits until he leaves her alone. Soo would not have reacted that way had it not been for the codes of IUMOS. Ironically, in example (3) Soo is in the presence of her husband, Rasool, yet on the basis of her own ideology – love before marriage – the lack of passionate love between them makes him an outsider, hence she becomes nervous and uncomfortable with his way of looking at her. Example (5) shows that these codes are enforced and well-known to all Iranians, even if some (like Joe) do not always observe them. This is Joe's first official visit to the Rustin household. It is evident here that when put in different circumstances and as contextual needs arise, all Iranians are able to act in accordance with the prescribed social norms.

### *Codes related to proximity*

Enforced as extra preventive measures and an addition to the rules of physical contact (which will follow in the next section), proximity codes enforce physical distance and thus restrictions for unrelated women and men. Mandanipour (2009) mentions this in *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* by saying that ‘boys and girls ... according to an old Iranian proverb, are like cotton and fire, and if left alone, will destroy not only themselves but their house and home as well’ (p. 282).

Based on these rules, non-*mahrums* are not to sit next to one another or walk together or be in the same room alone together. Also in public, there should always be a distance kept from the opposite sex, the invasion of which would otherwise disturb the comfort zone of the other party and thus would be considered rude, shameful, and offensive. Mandanipour adds: ‘These gentlemen [clerics/mullahs] reason that a man and a woman who are not *mahram* – meaning neither married nor immediate kin – should never be alone together in a room or in any enclosed space’ (2009, p. 9). This is the main reason for not allowing children to move out of their parents’ home until they are lawfully married. As Jafari (2013) states, ‘unmarried cohabitation of opposite sexes is taboo in Iran ... Cohabitation implies sex, and sex is enforced under the umbrella of heteronormative marriage’ (p. 86). Members of the opposite sex cannot even stay in a hotel together unless they have some proof of their relatedness. The same is true for co-ed roommate type of living arrangements such as in dormitories, or private rental accommodation, which are all banned in Iran.

Paradoxically to what seems to be the most essential element to any love, one of the prevalent and recurring motifs throughout *Yousef’s Sooreh* is the heroine’s request from the hero to not cross the proximity borders. Either directly, or indirectly – through another character, such as his grandmother, or via written notes – Soo repeatedly asks Joe to stay away from her. And he does to a great extent because he respects her religious beliefs and limitations. On rare occasions when he does not abide by these rules, he at least finds a shrewd way to legitimise his actions and/or the settings, just for her sake and to avoid making her feel uncomfortable, guilty, and above all sinful. Without such occasions, it would

have been impossible for them to get to know one another, let alone fall in love. Here are some highlights of Soo repelling Joe:

- (1) '... *Toro Khoda*, for the sake of God, forget about last week ... Stay away from me and never come back.' (p. 35)
- (2) '... Having these encounters makes me a sinner ... I can't afford to lose all that I've worked so hard to gain if you keep showing up in my life. ...' (p. 90)
- (3) *So again – and I hope this is the last time I say this – I don't need you or want you to interfere with my life.* (p. 55, italics in original)

Aside from dialogue and/or through written notes, Soo's continuous determination to remain unavailable and inaccessible, and her disinterest in any sort of contact with non-*mahrams*, are additionally presented through her actions in the storyline by how far she goes to avoid and ignore Joe. The fact that she runs away from him when he invites her into a van to speak to her; the way she changes her direction when she sees him saying goodbye to the Welfare staff; even her decision – following her escape – not to go to his grandmother's house, which she is certain is one of the first places he would check, and other similar attitudes and behaviours, are all indicative of this decisiveness in Soo to keep her religious boundaries intact, lest she loses her proximity with God.

Nonetheless, there are more means of conveying these codes other than through the protagonist, one of which is the use of a third character:

- (4) 'Don't interrupt us, but stay here. I am a *namahram*, and she thinks she'll be sent to hell if she talks to me in private. ...' (p. 55)<sup>33</sup>

The above example is Joe telling Mashd Abbas (an old worker at the orphanage) the reason why he should not leave them (Soo and Joe) alone. This is an example of the use of a third character, through which this cultural code can be conveyed. Via this method, there is sufficient emphasis without having to repeat the code in the dialogue between the interlocutors in a direct unnatural way.

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<sup>33</sup> Other examples can be found on pages 153 and 160 of *Yousef's Sooreh*.

Proper setting can be another useful way of resolving the issue with the codes of IUMOS.

- (5) 'There won't be any sinning involved. We've got other people on board and won't be alone,' he says ... (p. 86)

Joe's words to Soo are meant to justify his outrageous action of forcing Soo on a date with him in a van. In order to leave no excuse for Soo to reject the date he has set up for them, Joe has kept two people detained, blindfolded and handcuffed in a corner of the van, showing her his respect for her beliefs as well as indirectly implying these codes. Choosing an awkward place like a van for an enforced rendezvous – where Soo will not be seen by the public and hence will not be the subject of gossip – is a useful method of resorting to the setting as a strategy for this purpose.

#### ***Codes related to physical contact***

These codes are amongst the strictest of rules the violation of which is both a sin and subject to severe consequences and punishment by law. Regardless of its degree and severity, this law applies as much to small incidents, like a mere friendly handshake, as to incidents of the greatest magnitude: illicit sexual relations. In *Yousef's Sooreh*, in the short account given about the lovers' childhood and the reason why there has always been bad blood between Soo's father and Joe, there is indication of the same concerns about the breach of the laws of proximity and contact. After a trivial encounter in which Joe has approached Soo and carried her home when she had injured her ankle in the neighbourhood, her father had to move house to another suburb, to prevent the repetition of such disgraceful and demeaning contacts ever again.

No Western reader with less cultural awareness would expect or understand such a radical reaction from a father for what seems to be a minor incident. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi mentions this in her colleague's explanation to her, after she confides in him about another male staff member's refusal to shake hands with her after the onset of the Islamic Revolution. He says that 'no Muslim man would or should touch a *namahram* woman ...' (2003, p. 118). Also, in Iran any sexual activity other than those between a husband and a wife is banned

(Gashtili, 2013). This prohibition includes any such activities both in public and behind closed doors. In such socio-cultural atmospheres it goes without saying why children must live with their parents and maintain virginity until they marry. Boyfriend/girlfriend type of premarital heterosexual relationships as well as homosexual relationships are illegal and sinful (Gashtili, 2013; Jafari, 2013). The collective social structure of Iran does not recognise, nor permit, any partner-type relationships or living arrangements (Jafari, 2013). ‘Unmarried cohabitation of opposite sexes is taboo in Iran’ (Jafari, 2013, p. 86), which is plausible, considering how families will otherwise fail in protecting their name and reputation (socio-cultural mask) in public.

Certain means and strategies have been invented and deployed in most Eastern nations to keep this major phenomenon under control (Mernissi, 2002; Pepin, 2006). According to Pepin (2006), ‘[i]n order to prevent the seemingly inevitable social interaction between unmarried men and women, Muslim societies have developed specific customs or rituals that are intended to support the maintenance of spatial borders’ (p. 124). One is bifurcation of the zones and spatial division of territoriality. In Iran, this concept has been, to a great extent, actualised and is visible in the division of social spaces for men and women, such as buses, queues, mosques, and social event gatherings, to name a few. Even in children’s schooling up to twelfth grade (St. Martin, 1999), there is no co-ed institution in Iran, either public or private. According to Mandanipour (2009), ‘[i]t is to prevent such prologues and deadly sins that in Iran, females and males in schools, factories, offices, buses and wedding parties are kept apart. In other words, they are protected from each other’ (p. 8). The popular audience of *Yousef’s Sooreh* are made aware of this division and partition in religious households on a few occasions, particularly in Soo’s engagement gathering and her first wedding, where male and female guests are accommodated and entertained in separate sections of the same house.

Fornication and adultery – either pre- or post-marital – are forbidden from three different perspectives. They are religiously sinful, culturally shameful, and legally unlawful in Iran. As such, their occurrences are concealed and not publicised. This has also led to the lack of research on this topic in Iran (Farahani,

Cleland, & Mehryar, 2011; Sadeghi, 2008). According to Sadeghi (2008), ‘there are no certain data that demonstrate the rate of virginity among girls and the prevalence of the premarital relationships among the younger generations’ (p. 3). However, there are signs of gradual increase in such taboo interactions in Iran (Farahani, Shah, Cleland, & Mohammadi, 2012). This can be related to the current socio-economic crisis, poverty, inflation, unemployment, and all other obstacles leading to the younger generation’s lack of interest in and adherence to marriage. Honarvar and colleagues (2016) also confirm Iranians’ concealment and secretiveness in regard to sexual relations and how the stigma attached to such topics hinders the attainment of any reliable and accurate figures. Based on their recent study on pre-marital sex among Iranian singles in Shiraz,<sup>34</sup> the researchers found that such contingencies and experiences had the highest correlation, firstly with alcohol consumption, and secondly with secularity among the subjects (Honarvar et al., 2016). This is one major reason why religiosity and marriage are constantly encouraged in Muslim Eastern societies such as Iran.

In Mandanipour’s romance novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, we read words of advice to Sara from her female elders:

“Don’t forget that men only want one thing from women. No matter how many nice things they say, the minute they get what they came for, they will throw you away like a used tissue. No matter how many promises they make, they will never marry you because they think a girl who gives herself to them before marriage does not deserve to be their wife.” (2009, p. 286)

As such, cultural codes of IUMOS are again additional impediments in the wellbeing of people inhabiting a range of Islamic cultures, particularly women.

*Yousef’s Sooreh* manifests the codes of physical conduct and all that has been discussed in this section through the character of Soo, as a chaste protagonist. Yet, what makes the plotline shift and diverge to a whole new direction is her unique ideology to not only keep herself pure for her future husband – as any devout Muslim girl would – but also only to submit to him if and only if there is a true love connection between them before they become

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<sup>34</sup> Shiraz is a major city in southern Iran.

physically intimate, something extremely difficult to wish for and achieve in a closed collective Muslim culture. We read how she refrains from any physical contact with her husband, hoping that by their wedding night they would be in love. We read in her irritated husband's words when his attempts to move their relationship to a more physical level fail:

‘How are we supposed to go all the way on our wedding night if you keep this up?’

‘Keep what up? I just need more time to —’

‘Oh, for crying out loud, not only do you always have your covers on when I'm around, you also refrain from any type of physical contact with me. I've never seen a strand of your hair, nor your body, neither have I ever been allowed to the slightest touch or a hug or anything.’ (*Yousef's Sooreh*, p. 133)

Later when this marriage breaks down with Soo still a virgin, the popular audience can witness that although she and Joe are able to create this passionate connection before marriage, this bond is never based on physical intimacy. She never breaches these cultural and religious codes of physical contact, and he always respects her perspective. On page 91, we read: ‘He picks up the ring box and lands his hands on the wall of the van again, this time with Soo in between his arms, yet without coming into contact with her.’ Joe has planned to propose to Soo, and this is one of the most irresistible, as well as foreseeable, and plausible moments for the protagonists to share any sort of physical intimacy, yet the codes of IUMOS cause an unexpected shift in the plotline. Soo does not even allow him to propose and asks him to let her go.

### ***Codes related to behaviour and public attire***

It is one of the fundamental Islamic rules that women over the age of nine must cover themselves in the presence of non-related men older than fifteen. From the religious point of view, Muslims, and especially women, are instructed to adopt modest dress code and coverage (hijab) on the basis of three Qur'anic verses.<sup>35</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> 7:26, 33:59, and 24:31. The first one addresses both genders exhorting them to cover their private body parts. The second one encourages women – who reportedly used to all have head coverings before Islam – to lower the corner sides of their head covers, so that they will be

the Qur'an, the direct reason for this covering-up is to safeguard women and girls against harassments. However, dissociating the laws of religion from those of man-made patriarchal societies has been one of the most controversial and highly-debated topics in this area. Many Muslim scholars and researchers, such as Toossi (2012), depict and criticise the 'misogynist system that protects men and society from women's presumed destructive sexual attraction' (p. 139). She believes that hijab for women 'negatively stands for Islam's resistance to modernity, the challenges it sets against secular democracy, [and] women's oppression' (p. 139). After the 1979 Revolution in Iran this religious dress code started to gradually become required in public. It finally became an institutionalised law, enforced throughout Iran around 1983–84 (Hamzehei, 2014; Parker, 2005), marking a historic scandal by the Iranian government, as well as a flood of rage and opposition from the masses, both nationally and globally. While some critics believe that outside covering gains social respect and admiration for women, providing an easier job atmosphere to carry on their professions (El Guindi, 1999; Hoodfar, 2003; MacLeod, 1991; Moghadam, 1993; Mule & Barthel, 1992), the majority of people find it plain authoritarianism, dictatorship, and violation of human rights (Alizadeh, 2008; Asayesh, 1999; Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006; Nafisi, 2003; and others).

In addition to the enforcement of a public dress code by the current Iranian government (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006; Mandanipour, 2009; Nafisi, 2003; Pari, 1997; Parker, 2005; Pepin, 2006; St. Martin, 1999; Sadeghi, 2008), certain deeds are to be avoided based on the standards of modesty and honour. Any lustful smile, laughter, playfulness, showing sense of humour, joking around, singing, dancing, showing uncovered body parts, or flirtatious and flamboyant actions and body movements are forbidden. Tattooing and piercing body parts (except ear-piercing of girls, which is traditionally practised), heavy makeup, and use of rich, vivid coloured clothing are banned. As such, after the revolution 'bright and happy colours were rapidly fading from the streets of Iran' (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 120). In general, any behaviour which would get the attention of the opposite

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recognised as Muslims and will not be harassed and troubled outside. The third instructs women not to expose their beauty to men other than *mahrms* (mentioned previously in the discussion on eye contact and *mahrms*) and to extend their head covers down to their chests. There is also a fourth verse (24:60), in which elderly women are exempted from hijab.

sex and supposedly arouse sexual attraction is prohibited. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi says this in the words of Manna, one of her girls: ‘ “Everything is offensive to them [government] ... It’s either politically or sexually incorrect” ’ (2003, p. 61). Although these codes are applicable to both genders, girls from a young age are disciplined to behave accordingly while with boys a more relaxed and carefree attitude has been taken by elders.

Similar attitudes and actions are reported from other Middle Eastern countries, even in non-Islamic homes. Literature of migrant diaspora on post-revolutionary Iran is overflowing with themes and topics which reflect restrictions of freedom and violations of rights the current Iranian government has sanctioned in the name of religion. There is hardly any fiction or non-fiction or even academic texts about the current Iran which does not mention banning and prohibition of certain basic things which are allowed in Western culture, some even permitted in other Eastern nations. The Iranian government’s harsh punitive laws, arrests, imprisonments, and tortures of those who do not abide by these rules are no secret. The most well-known of these include proscription of drinking alcoholic beverages, socialisation of unrelated (non-*mahram*) men and women (such as shaking hands, dancing, dating, pre-marital relations, etc.), choice of public attire, brothel industry, music industry, social media industry, publishing industry, nightclubs, gambling, and the like (see, for example, Asayesh, 1999; Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006; Hejazi, 2011; Mandanipour, 2009; Nafisi, 2003). What most Iranians are looking for in Iran can be best summarised in the words of Baniamერი. In his anecdotal novel, *Iranican Dream* (published in the USA in 2005) he states:

I love America because no body [sic: nobody] tells me and my children what to do, what to wear, how to look, how to think, what to eat, what music to listen to, what book to read, what politics to believe in and what religion to practice. (p. 76)

In *Yousef’s Sooreh*, which is a different type of novel engaging with and negotiating adherence to cultural norms rather than rebelling against them, we read a few of the most needed attributes required of girls, through the free indirect speech of Khanom Jaan to her bold and rebellious granddaughter, Sara:

Decency, modesty, reservedness, and reticence, as well as womanly arts of homemaking, are undeniable requisites for a religious girl. People put girls under a microscope and scrutinise them carefully and only those who pass their eligibility test attract suitors. (pp. 5–6)

Below is an example of Soo's negotiations with these norms:

Tahmineh picks up a rock and throws it at him but it only hits the back of his bike. 'Son of a —'

'Never mind, let's just go before someone sees you interacting with a *namahram!*' says Soo, panting ... (p. 13)

Soo reminds Tahmineh of such codes after her lash out at a cyclist who has made a catcall at Soo. This is an indirect way of mentioning the existence of such rules for Muslim girls in dialogue. In light of these codes, I will now try to highlight their impact on romance fiction and how it affects narrative components.

### ***Reflections of the codes of IUMOS in romance texts of the Iranian diaspora***

Anita Amirrezvani's historical novel, *The Blood of Flowers* (published in the USA in 2007), portrays Iran in the seventeenth century with a love story that has elements of romance genre. Naheed falls in love with Iskandar, a famous polo player, during her secret visits to the games. She and Iskandar have never spoken to one another and only exchanged letters – and not directly, but through two other people. Yet, the adversity she encounters is only understandable from the tactful ways the author gives a thorough account of the cultural codes. Once Naheed's parents find out about the letters, her life turns upside down. Her enraged parents forbid her to ever have any contact with Iskandar, let alone allow her to marry him. The worst is yet to come. While the narrator tries to console Naheed and asks her not to give up hope for a future with Iskandar, Naheed drops another bombshell that her parents, having found out that she will not forgo Iskandar, have contracted a marriage with another man (p. 273), a rich widower, a much older man with a child. The narrator, who has not lived within these cultural codes, has this to say about the unexpected and unfair decision which changes the direction of the narrative as well as her friend's life: 'How could Naheed's parents, who had loved and spoiled their girl all her life, throw her at a

man while she was still mourning her first love? I felt very, very sorry for her' (p. 273).

It is evident how the breach of a few cultural codes of conduct, though they may not be so significant or even called violations to less culturally-aware readers, can impact people's future and change the storyline drastically.

Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing* (2003) illustrates the significance of these rules and their consequential impact on honour and reputation of individuals and their families in Pakistan. Khan portrays a proposal gathering for Nini (Nissrine), a wealthy, beautiful, more traditional type of girl, and Daanish, an open-minded US-educated young man who has returned home for holidays. Not thrilled with her son's living a bachelor's life with other Western girlfriends in the US, his mother, Annan, is determined to make him settle down with a girl of her choice in their homeland.

Nissrine sat quietly ... She kept her head lowered. Surely Daanish would take to her. She was not blonde like that other one in the pictures, but she was graceful and demure. Every man wanted to come home to that. (Khan, 2003, p. 85)

There is again emphasis on controlling the tongue and the eyes, gracefulness, modesty, and all that the word 'demure' can connote, as well as submissiveness and willingness for subordination, all of which are major merits Easterners in patriarchal societies always look for and admire in a bride-to-be. Yet, things do not turn out as planned when Nini drags her own opposite, her unorthodox, free-spirited best friend, Dia (the story's main protagonist), into the gathering for support. Khan skillfully and discreetly lodges the codes of eye contact in the text before moving on with the rest. She creates this sense of what is approved and encouraged in the Muslim Pakistani culture, and what is stigmatised, just by the atmosphere she creates with the narrative tone and choice of lexicon. First, a great emphasis is placed earlier in the novel on the value of lowering the gaze and not looking someone directly in the eyes in incidents such as the Qur'an recitation gathering (already mentioned on page 102), or the following in Dia's behaviour opposed to Nini's:

[T]hough she'd vowed not to, Dia scrutinized him [Daanish].

...

At last, Nini entered.

...

She set the tray down on a side-table. Then, carefully avoiding Daanish's end of the couch, approached his mother.

...

She did not even glance at the boy.

...

As she moved back toward the tray, Annam too studied her closely. Everyone did – except the boy. She arranged four quarter plates with napkins, and forks, offered the first to Annam, second to her mother, third to Daanish (still no eye contact), and fourth to Dia. (2003, pp. 218–219)

Khan then writes about Daanish's first full look at Dia, which is quite the opposite of how indifferent and unenthusiastic he had been towards Nini: 'The boy looked her full in the face. His eyes were large, amber-hued, beautiful. The irises dilated' (2003, p. 222). This look can easily be perceived as intentional, provocative, exposing his own attractiveness as well as being attracted to the opposite sex (Dia). Nonetheless, the author indirectly implies that it is a forbidden type of look according to the rules of IUMOS, subject to shame and taboo, which is exactly what happens later in the narrative. There is also clear indication of how the proximity rules of IUMOS are enforced in the gatherings with the way Khan has written Nini's careful movements and her preventive methods not to put herself in the forbidden proximity zone, near Daanish. But Daanish is not that observant about these cultural regulations. He intentionally changes his seat to socialise with Dia:

Daanish sat on the end of the couch next to Dia's sofa. There was now a gaping space between him and his mother. Conversation between the mothers ceased. Dia flushed. (2003, p. 220)

Similarly, Seraji's romance novel, *Rooftops of Tehran*, also about a proposal gathering, shows how important these codes are in Iran, just as they are in Pakistan. Seraji writes generally about these social codes: 'The bride – and

groom-to-be normally sit far apart and don't speak. They even avoid looking at each other' (2009, p. 16). Here, the couple are the prospective bride and groom, yet they still need to abide by such cultural dos and don'ts, even in pre-revolution Iran.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, a similar concern is brought up in Soo's family by her inexplicable lack of interest in marriage. In addition to that, Soo's younger sister, Sara, is bold, forward, daring, and also talkative, none of which are considered desirable traits for most girls in Middle Eastern cultures, and as such their chances of attracting appropriate suitors are slim. The popular audience feels the anguish and worry Soo's parents feel about their younger daughter's future and the cultural reason behind it. Nadeem Aslam also refers to this cultural code in his novel, *Maps for Lost Lovers*: '[W]hile men are happy to consort with women who are forthcoming and assertive, they will judge that trait objectionable in a potential wife' (2004, p. 156).

In the Eastern context, as discussed earlier, potential wives are often those the elders have carefully scrutinised (physically and behaviourally) for a considerable time, and approved. In Khan's *Trespassing* (a novel with a romantic love story), the protagonist Dia herself remembers telling Nini about Daanish that '*[h]e'll have fun with foreign women but marry a local one to please his mother*' (Khan, 2003, p. 285, italics in original). Khan's insertion of these codes of conduct within the layers of the story prepares the reader for such unusual reactions from the characters and the plot twists, which would otherwise be mostly inexplicable. Her technique in employing extra/minor characters as a facilitating device to convey the cultural codes is also notable. Without the presence of the mothers (Annam and Tasleem) it would have been much harder to pack the codes of IUMOS in the context of the proposal gathering. Their verbal and nonverbal reactions to the way the youngsters are acting, as well as their implicit and explicit suggestions and opinions, are all placed within the text as signifiers of cultural rights and wrongs.

Codes of conduct between the opposite genders are some of the strictest among Muslim Easterners, and are in no way exclusive to those living in their country of birth. Even immigrants who reside in the West, and are known to be

more open-minded and more influenced by Western culture, tend to show adherence to these codes, though to varying degrees. This subject has been the major theme in many multicultural as well as cross-cultural novels in English. The Pakistani writer Nadeem Aslam writes about a very similar theme, shame and honour killing, in his *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), a cross-cultural novel with a love story. The lovers, Chanda and Jugnu, are already dead within a small Pakistani community located in England when the story begins. The mystery of their deaths unfolds throughout the narrative. Chanda is a 25-year-old woman with two previous divorces and a third one pending the return of her missing husband who has abandoned her. She falls in love with the liberal intellectual, Jugnu, who is a 48-year-old Muslim-turned-Hindu, and moves in with him. Whilst she is happy to have finally started a relationship based on passionate love and free will, others in the community, including their own families, view this as a disgrace to their honour and the ultimate unforgivable act of sin, the punishment of which lies in the hands of her male kin. We read:

The matchmaker nods vehemently. ‘And as for Chanda: What a shameless girl she was, sister-ji, so brazen. She not only had poor Jugnu killed by moving in with him, she also ruined the lives of her own poor brothers who had to kill them – if that was what happened, of course ... But what I fail to understand is how Shamas-brother-ji [Jugnu’s brother] could have allowed the two of them to live together in sin? And how did you, Kaukab, manage to tolerate it, you who are a cleric’s daughter-born and brought up in a mosque all your life?’ (2004, p. 42)

Cases of fornication and adultery, like Chanda’s and Jugnu’s, are the highest violation of the laws of proximity and physical contact between the opposite genders and thus fertile grounds for maximum penalty. In light of the fact that the characters all reside within the Anglo-British matrix and are to abide by the British laws, the author, Nadeem Aslam, makes the incentives behind perpetrating this crime comprehensible. Aslam’s success is mostly in his elaboration of religious and cultural concepts of Pakistan down to the minute details, especially through the characterisation of Kaukab, Jugnu’s elderly sister-in-law. The author’s implicit strategy in conveying these cultural nuances are shown in description, also in dialogue and monologue. The following (about a character,

Charag, Kaukab's son and Jugnu's nephew) are some examples which clarify this point: 'He has never really known how to act in the company of an Asian woman: it's always been his understanding – the result of his upbringing – that reserve and aloofness is the best way to behave towards them' (2004, p. 131). The author further adds about Charag that 'he recognizes in her desperation something of his own earlier anxiety and amateurishness regarding contact with the opposite sex. The culture she shares with him is based on segregation, and on the denial and contempt of the human body ...' (2004, p. 133). Aslam's words match those of Eastern codes of proximity and communication, such as: distantness, reticence, lack of affection, avoidance of physical contact, indifference, etc. In the following, Aslam also succinctly highlights a number of other cultural practices in a few short sentences:

Chanda ... was sent to Pakistan at sixteen to marry a first cousin to whom she had been promised when a baby, but the marriage had lasted only a year and her mother had been devastated by the news of the divorce ...

[A]nother cousin in Pakistan took pity and agreed to marry her even though she was no longer a virgin. But he too divorced her a few months later ...

(Aslam, 2004, p. 54)

By means of briefing the reader on Chanda's past, the author touches upon the topics of teenage brides, interfamilial and arranged marriages, taboo attached to divorce, male-dominance, and significance of virginity, as his way of affirming such valued practices in the Eastern contexts. Honour killing, as the main theme in Aslam's novel, is again a proof that cultural practices can outweigh any other socio-legal system and can take place in the least expected times and places.

A reader with less cultural awareness may not find any rationale in many of the incidents related to the codes of IUMOS. For instance: why most female characters in Eastern cultural contexts tend to be reticent, reserved, shy, and submissive for no particular reason; why there are separate sections allocated for different genders in the Iranian buses, mosques, libraries, hospitals, gatherings, and so on; why the female character declines sharing a ride with men, or riding in a cab that is almost full with other male passengers; why some women refuse to be seen by a male doctor and insists on finding a female one. Propp (1928/1968)

states that ‘an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration’ (p. 9). As such, to make the necessary justifications for behaviours or actions which are culturally rooted and might be otherwise inconceivable to the popular audience, the writer needs to immediately decipher the cultural codes within close proximity of the particular text in which the behaviour or deed has occurred.

However, if the cultural equivocality and vagueness is already dealt with elsewhere prior to that point in the narrative, chances are the reader has already become familiar with the cultural code(s), and hence no repetition is needed. James Buchan, in his multicultural romance novel, *The Persian Bride* (published in the USA in 1999), posits the same Iranian mentality and ideology. Buchan’s protagonist, John, a British man working as a teacher in Tehran is in trouble with his headmaster for his lack of mindfulness, which has led to the unintentional breach of these cultural codes at the school setting:

“Capt. Turani telephoned me this morning. Your new pupil, Gen. Faramesh’s daughter, will not be coming back.”

“I am very sorry indeed to hear that, sir.”

“John! You set them as an essay topic ...” He looked down at a pad on his desk. “You set them as essay topic ‘Love’. You cannot talk about love to Iranian girls. It is too perilous.” He glared at me. “Didn’t I warn you, John?” (Buchan, 1999, p. 38)

The reason why codes of behaviour are categorised within the codes of IUMOS is the gravity of sexual dignity and honour in the Eastern culture. This means that everything related to the lack of proper behaviour in front of the opposite gender can be perceived as promiscuousness and immorality, hence shameful and contemptible. In the Persian culture, nothing can endanger honour as profoundly as sexual misconduct, especially for a family’s female members. According to Milani (1990), in Iran ‘the concept of honor is built around a woman’s virginity, the token of her inaccessibility ...’ (p. 6). Violation of the other cultural codes cannot have as dreadful an effect, or create as bad an image in people’s minds, as the violation of the codes of IUMOS can have on an Easterner. Refusing to belong to and connect with one’s collective social web,

lack of respect for the guests or elders, or even not being mindful of applying *ta'arof* in daily deeds, cannot be as degrading and deteriorating to an individual and cause so many psycho-social consequences as when losing honour because of an allegation of sexual impropriety, whether true or just a rumour. In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam puts it this way: 'What mattered was not what you yourself knew to have actually happened, but what other people thought had happened' (2004, p. 158), and as Milani (1990) states, in Iran '[s]hame rather than guilt is a major consideration' (p. 2), in such unmentionable circumstances.

Also in Aslam's novel, even putting aside the unlawful cohabitation of Chanda and Jugnu, their relationship was still a condemnable one, because it was the violation of religious and collective codes. Chanda being a Muslim while Jugnu a Muslim converted to Hinduism, they could not even marry under such circumstances, unless Jugnu would convert back to Islam. However, there is not much emphasis on this and instead the whole scandal throughout the novel is based on their illegitimate sexual courtship. Similarly, this proves how much more magnitude is placed on sexual honour in the Pakistani culture and how this overshadows other cultural entities, just as it is in the Persian culture, which is very similar to that of Pakistan.

Just as in the case of Uzma Aslam Khan's *Trespassing*, Nadeem Aslam's *Map for Lost Lovers* too has been chosen as a source text for this thesis. The rationale for this is that it provides this research with valuable insight on a diasporic Muslim community which after decades of submersion in Western culture still keeps its strong ties with its original roots, and in its most severe form. Even though Iran has its own particular cultural specificities which are distinct from its neighbouring countries, and this text focuses on diasporic Pakistani culture, there are enough resemblances between Iranian and Pakistani cultures, as well as the fact that both Iran and Pakistan are Islamic republic countries. The characteristics of this Pakistani text (mentioned before) justify its inclusion in the group of cross-cultural sources in this thesis.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, as soon as Soo's family finds out about the renegade Joe's involvement with their daughter, Joe and his family are asked to come over for questioning and explanation. We read: 'This can't possibly be considered a

proposal gathering when the hosts might thirst for Joe's blood for what they think he has done to Soo and her marriage' (p. 201). This description clearly indicates an Iranian family's hostile feelings – regardless of their faith – towards any nonconformist behaviour in relation to these codes. Later when Rasool falsely accuses Soo and Joe of adultery, we read: 'Of all the derogatory and disrespectful comments a religious family can be insulted with, he has just thrown in the most degrading one, jolting them and the Raads in the worst possible way' (p. 210). The reader who has already become familiar with the significance of codes of physical contact gets an even more vivid picture of each and every family member's reaction to such a horrifying confrontation, even when it is merely an untruthful speculation:

Joe turns his red face to him [Rasool] with his darkest look ever, while his sisters and grandmother bite their lower lips and cover their faces.

...

Khanom Jaan is beating and scratching herself on the face, worried that the neighbours have heard Rasool. Shireen is leaning on her already-trembling Sara for support, with a face that resembles the plaster on the wall. Salman threshes around towards his cousin, saying he has no right destroying his chaste sister's *aberu* and their *namous* ... his father and Sara catch him and hold him away from Rasool. Ebrahim is clenching his teeth and his fists. (pp. 210–211)

While this might appear to be melodramatic, in fact in all likelihood this reaction would have been much harsher, had it happened to an ordinary Iranian family. Since the Rustins are presented as God-fearing and respectable people who do not resort to violence, their reaction has been portrayed as one of the mildest ones. The magnitude of loss of virginity, *aberu*, *namous*, and the fear of losing face in front of neighbours are all emphasised and conveyed in this scene.

### **Problems in characterisation and plotting**

Each individual sees the world and his/her own actions through a specific lens or cultural filter, an inner awareness instated within humans that makes them see and feel the way they do, as well as how they interpret and react to others'

behaviours and actions. The apparatus of Persianness resembles a tree in which some branches represent Persian culture, some represent the Islamic religious rules, and some show socio-political objectives of the government. Yet, in a way they have all been consolidated into one tree whose individual branches cannot be differentiated. It is noteworthy that now after comprehensive examination and scrutiny within the previous five sections of this chapter the connectedness of these cultural elements becomes increasingly visible. The interlinking amongst them – one or a few being the cause of another, while being influenced by or having been the result of some others – is more easily noticeable than before. Their inter-affiliation has perceivably made a powerful web of these entities, actualising them as a unified whole called ‘culture’. This intermingling, interdependence, and collaboration further reinforce their strengths and applicability, and stabilises them, making them not only inseparable from one another but also ineradicable from the society.

This phenomenon is the key factor in the survival of cultures amid all other social upheavals. In fact, great attempts and efforts have been made in the domains of ethnography and anthropology toward cultural globalisation. However, it is a well-known fact that the theory of cultural homogenisation and/or transformation towards a universal utopian type of culture has been an ideal assumption for which there is not much hope of accomplishment (Boudreault-Fournier, 2003; Hannerz, 1990, 1992; Featherstone, 1990, 1995). In light of this, regardless of all the radical socio-political transformations a nation can encounter throughout its history, when it comes to its cultural framework, reformation is never as steady, nor as swift, even for those who live in exile. Aslam’s complex honour killing motif in *Maps for Lost Lovers* is a proof of this reality. He says it best in the words of Mah-Jabin as she lashes out at her mother, Kaukab, after the killings of her uncle, Jugnu, and his lover, Chanda:

‘My god, for all of you she probably didn’t die hard enough: you would like to dig her up piece by piece, put her back together, and kill her once more for going against your laws and codes, the so-called traditions that you have dragged into this country with you like s\*\*t on your shoes.’ (2004, p. 114, asterisks are mine)

The conventions and protocols governing members of the opposite sex who are not blood-related have significant effects on the plots and hence the dialogue in these diasporic writing corpora. This affects our understanding of male–female romantic relationships, a major complexity in an Iranian romance novel directed toward a Western audience. Religion and culture play a great role in Iranian ways of love and romance. Reflecting these matters in a cross-cultural novel and, for example, explaining an Iranian girl's fear and shyness at the presence of a man who is an outsider to her, or a father's rage if a man even looks at his daughter the wrong way, can become challenging. A character, who might have been portrayed by the writer as a person with certain merits and flaws, might not possess such attributes in the eyes of the reader, or not to the degree the writer might have wanted him/her to, if the writer fails to convey these codes. The same is true for plotting. Except for incidents beyond the characters' control – though there may be a lot of those – other events that take place within the narrative are based on the decisions made by the characters, decisions which readers should be able to relate to, and in which find some rationale. These decisions would sound strange, out of place, unreasonable, and unexpected to those who might have very little or no prior knowledge about what are considered rights and wrongs, or values and taboos, in the society being written about, unless the writer tactfully embeds the cultural norms in the narrative. At the starting point of the cross-cultural novel, many readers are not as familiar with the culture, tradition, and religion as the writer is. However, it is the writers who should be able to use certain skills to convey this to another readership. If there is enough of this done in a novel, those readers will accept the reality of characters and the story world being set up by the novel, because the audience has been able to embed themselves in this different cultural milieu through the writing.

Looking at patriarchy, for example, the writer has to deal with the dialogue and plots, which are sensible and familiar to a native Persian, yet at the same time, may appear too harsh and unrealistic to a Westerner. Some of these cultural nuances, such as the gravity of virginity before marriage, are not as implausible and far-fetched to a foreign reader. Yet, others might be more problematic and in need of proper tackling by the writer. For example, whether the relationship can be called true love if a girl stays faithful to her culture and, based on the rule of

respect to her seniors, refuses to elope with her love interest as the last resort to unite with him. Or whether females, who on the basis of cultural standards are rebellious, disgraceful, and shamed for their improper conduct, can measure up to the standards of becoming a heroine in the romance genre and be worthy of such a title in the novel. Values are the incentive and the driving force to all that occurs in the writing corpora. Readers can be allowed to work things out, according to their own knowledge, but the cues provided by the writer must be there too, especially for the less ‘well known’ traditions and codes. I add here an example from the values significant to Persian literature. Some critics believe that based on historical evidence, even in the most poignant and touching romantic relationships referred to in the Persian literature, women are merely ‘means of providing comfort to men (not to mention producing heirs) ...’ (Gabbay, 2009, p. 681). In her analysis of women characters throughout Ferdowsi’s epic, *Shahnameh* (1010/2007), one of the most celebrated classics in the history of Persian poetry, Gabbay depicts women’s inferiority, submission, and subordination, and argues that in this timeless classic ‘successful love depends on an unequal relationship between the sexes and a woman’s obedience to her mate’ (2009, p. 682). Clearly, this motif, as accepted as it still is in the male-chauvinist context of Iran, will not be appropriate for a romance written in English for a global readership.

As already discussed, even the whole concept of love can have a wide scope of meaning in different cultures, and yet not even mean the same thing to people sharing the same culture. For instance, Iranians believe in a common old-time saying equivalent to the English proverb ‘blood is thicker than water’. They say *the bond through a marriage contract is only made of paper*, subject to be torn apart at any time, whereas *a bond through blood and heart is unbreakable and perpetual*. In other words, blood-related family members always come first and are forever preferred to a spouse and their side of family. This is another reason why a cross-cultural writer has to be extremely conscious about crafting the romance novel in a way to reflect such cultural nuances in the story and yet be mindful of balancing them out in fair proportions not to dissociate the reader from the narrative line.

Creating a heroine for a romance novel in English, based in a patriarchal, collective society with all the emphasis and value placed on a woman's silence, seclusion, and stoicism, is not a straightforward task for a cross-cultural writer, for she will lack conformity to the Western romance genre standards and hence might not fulfil the romance reader's expectations. As Kaler (1999) argues, the romance writer should 'create a heroine with which the modern reader can identify' (p. 4). The writer would have to convey the character as a non-conforming, interesting, assured and intricate woman who can still be in a love relationship despite the cultural pressures.

Other less significant (minor) characters can be variously dissimilar in their personal traits and characterisation in novels, and they often are. However, protagonists must ideally be likable, or at least relatable and believable. Otherwise, the reader will lose interest in them and abandon the novel. The cross-cultural writer has to create characters who not only stay faithful to their own cultural heritage but whose behaviour and actions are – at the same time – sensible enough to measure up to universal standards of rationality as well as the conventions of the genre in hand. Fulfilling these two requirements simultaneously is the most difficult challenge for a cross-cultural writer. Nonetheless, what can be a survival kit along the way for these writers is the fact that although protagonists need to be likeable and captivating to hold interest in the reader, they do not need to be perfect or ideal. Their imperfection makes them more human and realistic. As long as the reader is enabled to find some sense and reason in the characters and plotting, it will suffice. Any ambitious attempt to offer more would be futile, because considering the innate nature of these cross-cultural novels, not every single objective and expectation of a reader can be met by the author. In such circumstances, the writer should aim to make the story as plausible as possible – or at least plausible enough – to be satisfying. The reader can fill in the gaps about the conflicts that are at play, both for the personal characterisation and for cultural norms. As long as the writer does his/her best in artfully teaching the cultural entities, and as long as the majority of the readers find enough logic and justification in the plot and characterisation, the novel has done its job.

### ***Romance and religiosity***

As the last point of discussion in this chapter, I need to mention the difficulty and pressure which exist for a cross-cultural writer in composing a romance novel whose main character(s) are religious, or in the case of *Yousef's Sooreh*, are practising Muslims. As also indicated by Mandanipour (2009) and other critics and commentators, within the current public atmosphere of Iran, and with all the existing codes of IUMOS, it is nearly impossible to fall in love and maintain a romantic relationship. Of course, when it comes to practical realities, his witty tone and satirical exaggeration – which are, by the way, his way of opposing the government's harsh rules – need not be taken as seriously as he sounds. There are and always will be those Easterners who will not abide by the laws, and thus there are sufficient – if not plenty – opportunities for the opposite sex to meet, fall in love, and be in a relationship, regardless of all the accompanying hazards and taboos. Country reports indicate mixed-sex gatherings of different types, weddings, parties, etc., concealed from the authorities' watchful, prying eyes, as well as hidden trysts and rendezvous in which men and women socialise and commingle freely with not much restraint or obligation to follow the codes of IUMOS or fear of their elders' objection or the government officials' interference (Batmanghelichi, 2013; Mandanipour, 2009; Omestad, 1998). Alizadeh's *The New Angel* and Khan's *Trespassing* are two novels in which lovers form and maintain such relationships under harsh constraints.

Verily migrant fiction writers have the liberty to go beyond socio-political realities when crafting their narrative – to the point of writing fairytales or escapist romance fiction – yet as discussed before, their fiction often reflects the social climate of the time and the context they are writing about. Designing a romance novel with characters who are not keen to observe the codes of IUMOS in their country of birth and prefer to live more or less a Western type of life, is a nuanced task and a different route to be taken by the writer. The reason is that these characters (such as the lovers, Dia and Daanish, in *Trespassing* or – to a lesser degree – Bahram and Fereshteh in *The New Angel*) do not have total restriction or self-restraint in public and especially not when they are alone in their private zones, particularly in the former Pakistani novel. In fact, this

freedom increases their resemblance to Western characters despite the novels' cross-cultural nature. Because of these similarities, Western readers will have an easier task of relating to such characters and hence the easier the job of the writer in characterisation.

Writing a romance about devout and righteous Muslims while adhering to the conventions/formulas of the romance genre is a different story altogether. To many spiritual individuals the most intimate relationship for a human being is the one with God: to love Him and be loved by Him (Chittick, 2000). This proximity to the Almighty is achieved through avoidance of sinning and/or repentance, an idealistic notion to God-fearing people, a motif they believe in and long for, because to them no other love is or should be as worthy. Yet, this belief (which would take the discussion to Sufism, Mysticism, and the concept of platonic love, all out of the scope of this research) makes no contradiction with terrestrial love. Persian Sufis manifest this love in what Mandanipour calls 'an earthly heavenly beloved, a beloved who can be a woman and yet is a representation of God' (2009, p. 20). In fact, religion strongly enjoins love and intimacy between married couples, as the earthly subordinate form of this spiritual love between humans and their Creator.<sup>36</sup> There is no denial or repudiation of either one. It merely means that, if put in a dilemma, a religious person should always avoid sinning and give up on earthly love, if need be. Each and every character in a romance novel, regardless of their spiritual or secular allegiance, has their own flaws and shortcomings, as well as a great tendency to sin, and also the need to be in love and choose a lifetime partner on the basis of that passionate love. Religious Iranian romance characters need context and opportunity to meet, communicate, fall in love, resolve the hurdles obstructing their love journey, and be united at the end, all without much permissible means of contact in current Iran.

In cases such as *Yousef's Sooreh*, where characters are more bound to these cultural codes and especially the religious ones, the characterisation and plotting can be extremely challenging in all phases of the composition while abiding by

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<sup>36</sup> This is mentioned in a Qur'anic verse as one of the signs of God, indicating that God has not only created mates for humans, He has also bestowed love, affection, compassion, and mercy upon them, so that they can find repose and tranquillity (Qur'an, 30:21).

the conventions of the genre. Physical attraction which is often the very first step to developing romantic feelings toward someone might in fact not be the first step for these characters, maybe not even the last. A covered, silent woman, who is obliged to keep away from men, does not have much if any opportunity to attract anyone of the opposite sex, let alone gain the qualifications of a heroine. The same is true for a religious man in his conduct with females. Indeed, most Iranian females whose conditions are best described by Milani as ‘suppressed physically and verbally by the conventions of the veil and public silence’ (1992, p. 46), do not usually qualify as heroines of romance novels to Western readers with less cultural awareness. As such, writing a romance on this population is challenging.

In *Yousef’s Sooreh*, this problem is intentionally reminded at the onset of the romance novel by the use of exposition during an early stage of the plot. The following are Tahmineh’s words about Soo:

She [Soo] covers herself from head to toe in front of *namahrams*, nonblood-related people of the opposite gender. She doesn’t look at them or have physical contact with them. She doesn’t allow herself to be in the same room alone with them or smile at them or even freely chat with them except when a short talk is absolutely necessary. (p. 15)

Through a minor character’s free indirect discourse about the protagonist’s ideology as a true Muslim, an initial understanding is provided of the protagonist’s personality and why others believe that she will never succeed in falling in love before marriage.

However, there are ways of reaching this goal, by proper characterisation. The fact that these characters still manage to fall in love proves that it must be through other unconventional routes. As for the problem with reservedness and silence, Seraji’s statement that ‘we Persians are masters of silent communication’ (2009, p. 146) is something to ponder on. In *Yousef’s Sooreh*, Joe is madly in love with Soo without even once seeing her body prior to their marriage, so she must have possessed other means of attracting him. In composing a romance, as Breslin (1999) states, ‘women of special gifts and powers can work out their destinies unencumbered by structures of patriarchy’ (p. 84). To get past this

cultural hurdle, writers who face the same predicament can assign certain other capabilities and powers to their characters.

Moreover, literature shows certain flexibilities in the romance genre which have been previously employed by other writers, allowing some room for adjustments and alterations in its classical framework.<sup>37</sup> In light of all the conflicting and colliding factors, in *Yousef's Sooreh*, I have tried to deal with these cultural issues within the story world and characters of the Muslim community while adhering to the principles of the romance genre for the Western readership.

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<sup>37</sup> This point is further explored in another section titled 'Romance genre and its parameters' on pages 39–50.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Impact of Linguistic Features of the Persian Language on Writing Dialogue – The Translation Trauma**

This chapter is dedicated to addressing certain linguistic features of the Persian language which affect cross-cultural writing, more specifically romance fiction in the Iranian matrix, as well as the translation issues in writing dialogue from within a context of Persian culture and language. The following subcategories are elaborated on in separate sections:

- (a) Figures of speech in cross-cultural fiction.
- (b) Lexical components, the lack of exact equivalents, and untranslatable terms.
- (c) Contradictions in modes of address, forms, styles, prayers, profanity, emotive attributes.
- (d) Nonverbal language, gestures, facial expressions, and body talk.

I need to further accentuate the inseparability of culture and language, and the reality that culture's impact does not completely end in Chapter 1. As will be evident on numerous occasions throughout this chapter, culture still continues to influence cross-cultural fiction writing through the linguistic attributes of the Persian language all of which in turn impact diasporic cross-cultural writing. In other words, culture not only directly impacts writing fiction in Iranian diaspora, it also does so indirectly by how it affects the Persian language attributes.

#### **Figures of speech**

The emergence of pragmatics has marked a turning point in linguistic studies. Language is no longer considered as merely forming isolated blocks of words, but as the interlocutors' intended meaning in context and interaction. According to Thomas (1995), pragmatics stole the spotlight from other linguistic disciplines in the 1980s. This branch is 'the study of linguistic phenomena from the point of view of their usage properties and processes' (Verschueren, 1999, p. 1). Put in

simpler words, it is ‘the study of intended speaker meaning’ (Yule, 1996, p. 127). Since pragmatics has broken the conventional semantic doctrines and gained more significance over other domains of linguistics, more light has been lately shed on speech-acts and figures of speech.

Among the many figures of speech, proverbs, simile, metaphor, symbols, idioms, as well as expressions – an inclusive general term which is sometimes used to refer to any one of the aforementioned – are the most challenging parts of a language. Dealing with these figurative parts of language becomes even more daunting when writing a cross-cultural work, where the writer is dwelling in the realm of two totally different worlds simultaneously and moving in and out of each constantly. At the same time, figures of speech are the required herbs and spices without which language will be bland and tasteless, and often dysfunctional too. Their absence might lead to failure in the act of communication when evoking certain intended emotions.

As Grisham (2006) puts it, ‘[w]ell crafted poetry, stories, and metaphors have been used for centuries by politicians, philosophers, artists, authors, playwrights, and indigenous peoples, to transfer knowledge and to elicit emotive feelings’ (p. 487). This is why figures of speech are an indispensable part of every language and are widely utilised by all peoples in various forms and contexts. Junghare (1982) further supports this by stating that ‘[t]he emotional impact a particular literary work will produce depends not only on the content but on elements of esthetic expression – ... imagery, simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, style’ (p. 126). The same notion can be particularly pertinent to romance fiction in which, by means of proper character development, focalisation, and dialogue, a romance writer can produce an emotive, passionate, and touching narrative.

Although this research is about writing a cross-cultural novel in English, not translating an existing one into English, it would be incomplete without elaborating on some significant issues pertaining to translation. While the plot and characters often are conferred with newness and originality, the writing process of a cross-cultural novel by a cross-cultural writer might not be a start from scratch. Akin to the socio-cultural factors, linguistic nuances too create

hindrances in the flow of writing and limit the author's ability to freely express the thoughts of characters in dialogue. This process can be viewed as a mixture of constant and simultaneous writing and translating which in itself is owing to the fact that there is more than one language and culture involved at all times. As such, these interferences are inevitable and in need of proper governing. When dealing with Persian as the source language, problems become multilayered in this regard because of Persian's rich poetic background and prolific number of figures of speech as well as their prevalent usages by its native speakers. As Mandanipour (2009) puts it, '[o]ur fourteen-hundred-year old language contains thousands of symbols, metaphors and similes ...' (p. 54).

As a general rule, in the cross-cultural realm the majority of figures of speech can be assigned into the following three main categories:<sup>38</sup>

- $\alpha$ ) where there is a one-to-one matching/similar equivalent for the same speech act between the source and target languages;
- $\beta$ ) where there is no exact equivalent for the same speech act between the two languages, but the two expressions do not contradict one another, and the source speech act can be replaced with a similar one in the target language;
- $\gamma$ ) where there is no similar equivalent for the same speech act between the two languages, and the two expressions represent contradicting concepts within the two cultures.

Usually Group  $\alpha$  comprises a limited number of expressions which are a blessing to work with for writers. Group  $\beta$  can also be managed effortlessly, as long as readers are notified and familiarised with the new cultural marker for each expression. Group  $\gamma$ , however, can become challenging, requiring certain techniques and methods which have been designed, used, and researched for years in the domains of linguistics, translation, and writing. While noting these three groups, different types of figures of speech are explored with examples.

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<sup>38</sup> Since they will be frequently referred to throughout this section, for easier recognition, I have assigned Greek alphabet to these three groups.

## Persian expressions

In its colloquial sense, this is a general umbrella term covering most Persian figures of speech, while in a more schematic sense Persian expressions fall into two distinct categories. The first consists of basic typical expressions, whereas the second mainly enfold the idiomatic, metaphorical, and proverbial ones which are far more complex, and as such these will each be examined separately in this section. As abundantly and effortlessly as expressions are exchanged on a day to day basis by native speakers, transferring their exact meaning into another language can be a real struggle. Routine expressions whose surface (literal) meanings have either lost their denotations over time, or can no longer be recognised and deciphered because severe alterations or deformations have taken place in their constituent words, can become quite problematic in translation. This difficulty in translating a lost primary meaning is also a problem for cross-cultural writing.

In cross-cultural fiction, choosing the right expression even in the simplest context can be challenging. For instance, an Iranian child upon seeing her father arrive home after work would normally use the colloquial expression ‘*Khasteh nabashid!*’ (literally, ‘Don’t be tired!’) to greet him. Obviously the literal translation would be erroneous because its surface meaning is nowhere near its figurative meaning. Moving from lexical towards discourse levels of communication, an exact equivalent phrasal unit for the above Persian expression would be the prayer form of expression: ‘May you never be/get tired.’ Even now, with the selection of the perfect equivalent, the translation is incoherent and incomplete as the real meaning of this expression can be mapped somewhere among these three English expressions: ‘Well done’, ‘Keep up the good work’, or ‘I appreciate your efforts’. In such cases, a cross-cultural writer faces another major problem: the lack of authenticity. Such expressions are hardly ever uttered by Western children to their father as a greeting while it is commonly used by speakers of Persian language. To amend this sort of unnatural expression which would undoubtedly look odd and awkward, the writer needs to choose more authentic phrases or expressions commonly used by the native speakers of

English for greeting, such as: ‘How was your day, Dad?’ or ‘How is it going, Dad?’

The downside to this undertaking, however, is that it would lead to eliminating all the contextual cultural factors embracing that expression, in other words, the initiatives which provoke children to utter such nuanced greetings compared to those raised in Anglo cultures. A simple Western type of greeting would not convey all those extra linguistically loaded connotations such as obligations and compliance to the rules of patriarchy, respect to parents and elderly relatives, etc., and hence would fail to transfer the message as accurately as the Persian one does. The following shows how this is dealt with in *Yousef’s Sooreh*:

All except Ebrahim’s mother stand up to welcome the man of the house as he [Ebrahim] enters with two paper bags full of groceries followed by Soo, the family’s firstborn.

‘*Salaam, Baba, khasteh nabashid,*’ the children greet their father, bowing in respect.

‘How was your day, Dad?’ asks Salman.

‘We hope it wasn’t too tiring,’ adds Sara.

Soo takes the bags from him while she and Sara give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Shireen and Ebrahim, however, don’t show much passion and affection, and avoid physical contact. ‘Welcome home, *agha*, sir.’ She [Ebrahim’s wife] takes his coat off ... (p. 6)

A seemingly better option might be for the writer to resort to the more native-like English equivalent and at the same time bring into play the rest of the other socio-cultural tints by adding other elements to the story. The added behaviours and actions upon the arrival of the head of the household assist the writer in conveying this foreign expression. After ‘How was your day, Dad?’ the child can be given extra/complementary actions and even dialogue to show the Persian cultural signifiers, such as getting up from a seated position at her father’s arrival and saying: ‘Please let me take your coat. May I bring you anything to eat

or drink, Dad?’ etc. Only then, consolidating these together as a package, the true meaning of such expressions as the Persian ‘*Khasteh nabashid*’ can be conveyed.

Literary works studied for this research show different approaches by other cross-cultural writers in dealing with common expressions. However, most writers do not hesitate to bring in the actual Persian (foreign) word within the text, along with its exact English equivalent to make it clear. The meaning usually follows the foreign word either within parenthesis or as an appositive within commas, or annotations somewhere not too far from the foreign lexical item. The following exemplify how this is done by other diasporic writers Mahbod Seraji, Shirin Ebadi, Ali Alizadeh, and Uzma Aslam Khan in their fiction and non-fiction, respectively, *Rooftops of Tehran*, *Iran Awakening*, *Iran: My Grandfather*, and *Trespassing*. An example from the accompanying novel is also included:

- (1) Goli Jaan is overcome with joy. “*Enshallah*, God willing!” she whispers.  
(Seraji, 2009, p. 180)
- (2) He [Khomeini] instructed the nation to march up to their rooftops en masse at nine P.M. and scream *Allaho akbar*, God is greatest. (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006, p. 36)
- (3) ‘*Allah O Akbar! God Is Supreme! ...*’ (Alizadeh, 2010, p. 45)
- (4) ‘*Allah malik hay*. God decides.’ (Khan, 2003, p. 96)
- (5) ‘... How long that will last, *Allaho a’lam*, God is all-knowing.’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 137)

For other expressions which are prevalent in Persian, but their English transliteration or transcription is not mentioned in the text, different methods are employed by the writers. However, there is evidence of great tendency to keep the meaning of the translation as close as possible to its original Persian flavour even at the cost of losing authenticity in English. The following elucidates this point:

- (6) “God forbid, May the devil’s ear be deaf ...” (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 202).
- (7) May dirt fall on their heads, I thought to myself. (Pari, 1997, p. 45)

- (8) In old Iranian tradition, he plucks a strand of his beard and puts it in the palm of the commander's hand as guarantee of his promise. (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 279)
- (9) '... It was her dying wish that I hand it to his wife ... You don't have to wear it. It'll be too big anyway, but please accept it, or *she'll be shaken in her grave.*' (Yousef's Sooreh, p. 280)

The above four are exactly how Iranians would use these expressions in their dialogue, and consequently any native speaker of English can sense the unnaturalness which is intentionally left unamended by the writer to preserve its cultural context. In (9) I have intentionally used italicisation to make the expression distinct from its English equivalent: 'she'll turn in her grave'. Nonetheless, there are exceptions to how far writers will go to keep their loyalty to cultural norms and be reflective of cultural nuances, for example, 'I know these women like the back of my hand' (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 275). Here, the writer could have easily replaced the dialogue with the famous Persian expression 'knowing someone/something like the palm of one's hand', which would not have been difficult for the Western reader to understand. Yet in this specific case, Mandanipour chooses to use the correct and authentic English equivalent.

One thing to keep in mind is that not every writer applies the same technique in dealing with figures of speech, and not even the same author shows consistency in adhering to the same methods. This leads to wide variety of strategies used in the cross-cultural literature. Having said that, informing the reader of what and why figures of speech are used is of prime importance and as such, best attempts and efforts are made to fulfil this. For example, when dealing with '*Allaho Akbar*' and '*La elaha ell Allah*' (also another common religious expression and a Qur'anic verse), Alizadeh has used a variety of ways in his two books:

- (10) "*Infidels! Allah o Akbar! Allah o ...*" Abbas roared insolently. (2008, p. 44)
- (11) "Allah O Akbar! Allah O Akbar! La Allah-a El-Allah!" (2008, p. 128)
- (12) 'There Is No God But Allah, ...' (2008, p. 147)

- (13) ‘*Allah O Akbar! God Is Supreme! ...*’ (2010, p. 45)
- (14) Columns of teenage Iranian Volunteers, some tied together with ropes and chanting *God Is Supreme*, walked ahead of Iranian tanks to clean [sic: clear] the landmines ... (2010, p. 226)

In (10), the author is using the first expression for the first time in his novel *The New Angel*, but he does not provide the meaning in English. In (11), again both these expressions are mentioned without their English translation, until in (12) he gives the definition of the second expression. In (12) and (14), only the English translations of ‘*La elaha ell Allah*’ and ‘*Allaho Akbar*’ are stated without the Persian/Arabic wording, yet the capitalisations show that it is the translation of the exact Arabic/Persian expression applied as a chant or slogan in both texts. Example (13) is a line from Alizadeh’s non-fiction, *Iran: My Grandfather* (2010), in which he has both the Persian/Arabic as well as the English meaning of the first expression, adjacent to each other. Therefore, having already given this information, in (14) he only mentions the English meaning of the expression.

In *Yousef’s Sooreh*, given the novel is mainly centred around the more religious population of Iranian Muslims, there is an abundant application of expressions containing ‘*Khoda*’ (Persian for ‘God’), as well as ‘*Allah*’ (Arabic for ‘God’). This wide application provides the audience with a good hint that these expressions are used when a character is seeking assistance from the deity, asking God for forgiveness, begging Him to accept their repentance, or a promise to Him not to repeat a sin, and the like. For this reason, even a single case of glossing or annotation is sufficient. The reader will not need reminders, given these expressions continue to reappear in the novel.<sup>39</sup> Following are some examples of these from *Yousef’s Sooreh*:

- (15) ‘*Khodaya mano bebakhsh! Forgive me, God! ...*’ (p. 50)
- (16) ‘*Khodaro shokr, Thank God,*’ says Soo. (p. 107)

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<sup>39</sup> The Persian word *Khoda* and the Arabic *Allah* are mentioned in *Yousef’s Sooreh* on 15 and 13 occasions, respectively. The English word ‘God’ and ‘the Almighty’ have been mentioned over 200 times and eight times, respectively, in the same novel.

- (17) ‘*Khodaye nakardeh*. God forbid, has anything happened to the mother of your children?’ (p. 228)
- (18) ‘*Khoda margam bedeh*. God, take me now.’ Khanom Jaan begins ... (p. 79)
- (19) ‘... *Khoda oon roozo nayareh*. May God never bring that day!’ (p. 79)
- (20) ‘Yes. But then, as religious people like you would say, *Khoda bahash bood*, God was with him. ...’ (p. 222)
- (21) ‘*Khodaya!* What catastrophe is this, Lord? ...’ (p. 211)
- (22) ‘*Toro Khoda*, for God’s sake, let him go, Joe. ...’ (p. 212)
- (23) ‘No. *Khoda nakone*, I hope to God that doesn’t happen. ...’ (p. 235)
- (24) ‘*Vai Khoda!* Oh my God! Please don’t!’ whispers Soo, short of breath. (p. 32)
- (25) ‘... *Khoda rahmatesh kone*. May God bless her soul,’ says Ebrahim ... (p. 228)

As shown above, on first application, the meaning of each religious expression is glossed within the English text. However, no glossing or annotations are used in any subsequent application of the same expressions. The same treatment has been applied in *Yousef’s Sooreh* to the religious expressions with Arabic origins commonly used by Iranian Persian speakers. Due to the ancient Persia’s invasion by Arabs around the middle of the seventh century, a great deal of Arabic language has ever since entered the Persian language, especially into those areas related to religion and the Qur’an. The following are some examples of such expressions:

- (26) ‘Please calm down or you’ll have a panic attack or *na’oozo bellah*, God forbid, a heart attack, *agha*,’ cries Shireen. (p. 79)
- (27) ‘*Alhamdo lillah!* Thank God!’ (p. 121)

- (28) ‘*Astaghfer Allah!*’ She [Khanom Jaan] repeats this mantra while biting the skin between her thumb and index finger, a sign of repentance, asking God for forgiveness for the disgraceful phrase she was compelled to utter. (p. 11)
- (29) ‘*Astaghfer Allah!* I repent to you God!’ he says, raising his hands. (p. 229)
- (30) ‘*Astaghfer Allah rabbi va atoobo elaih,*’ whispers Soo, walking back home with a mixture of strange and contradictory feelings while repeating the famous repentance mantra. (p. 61)

However, the following examples from the same novel are not as straightforward, hence they require special treatment in the English text:

- (31) ‘*Masha Allah, masha Allah!*’ Khanom Jaan expresses her admiration for the stranger, checking Joe out some more as he rides away, having let go of the bike handles and putting his helmet back on. (p. 174)
- (32) ‘... *Ya Allah!* O God! Please make this easy for me, for the sake of the one hundred twenty-four thousand prophets and the fourteen holy figures.’ (pp. 59)
- (33) Soon after the doctor leaves, Rasool knocks at the door and asks for permission to enter. ‘*Ya Allah!*’  
Soo straightens herself up, making sure she is nicely covered, something that makes her parents exchange a look full of astonishment. ‘It’s only Agha Rasool, your husband,’ says Shireen. (p. 142)
- (34) Once each family has had their chance to be photographed with Soo, the women are asked to go back to the drawing room and allow Rasool to come in, so that the bride and groom can have their own personal wedding pictures taken privately ... The *hejabi* women cover themselves up with their stylish wedding veils. After repeating the word *Ya Allah*, loudly announcing his entry and keeping his eyes on the floor, Rasool passes through the women’s section ... (p. 177)
- (35) ‘*Ya Allah!*’ says Ebrahim, knocking at the door before taking his shoes off.  
‘No need, Agha Ebrahim. I live alone now. My wife ... I lost her to cancer two years ago, sir.’ (p. 228)

Looking at example (31), the Arabic phrase '*Masha Allah!*' in a literal sense means 'Whatever God wants.' However, when used as an expression by a Persian Iranian it implies admiration, astonishment, and praise of something with high value, which in turn indirectly carries its original Arabic meaning, implying that God should be praised for creating something that praiseworthy. That is why in example (31) the usage of the expression containing the word '*Allah*' is different to the other ones. Accordingly, the description following Khanom Jaan's expression clarifies this. The last five are examples of the usages of '*Ya Allah!*' which literally means 'O God!'. However, used as a Persian expression it has three totally different meanings. Its most common usage as shown in example (32) is as a mantra when seeking help and attention from God. The second usage is a colloquial semi-offensive order in the form of imperative to someone (usually in a lower rank and class) to work faster and avoid loitering. In this sense, it has not been used in *Yousef's Sooreh*.

However, the third usage of this expression, as shown in examples (33, 34, and 35), is again dissimilar to the previous two. Usually a decent and devout man who is expected to be aware of the religious rites and codes of conduct in an Islamic society would say '*Ya Allah!*' in an audible voice before entering any place where there might be a chance of him coming across women who would otherwise be oblivious and unaware of his entry and therefore may not be appropriately covered. This expression is the outsider's announcement of his entrance as a means to prevent a sin. If used in the latter figurative sense '*Ya Allah!*' denotes an unrelated man's request for permission to enter a secluded female environment. And unless he hears a consensual reply of some sort, it would be religiously and morally unacceptable for him to cross that border.

In example (33), the awkward reaction from Soo, who has never felt intimate enough with her new husband to receive him without her covers, along with her mother's objection to that in the dialogue that follows, conveys the meaning of this expression. In example (34), the elaborate annotation in the description and the pictorial imagery of the women's section is enough to show why this expression is used by the groom. In example (35), conveying the meaning of this expression is made possible by the second speaker's dialogue.

His sentence is used to indirectly explain this expression without making the conversation between the two native speakers odd and artificial.

Another point worth mentioning is that regardless of the interplay of religious roots in the way these expressions are put to use by Persian speakers, they are so deeply intertwined with the Persian culture and tradition that even Persian atheists, seculars, and agnostics would spontaneously and unintentionally use them in daily conversations. This is another proof of the way culture has the upper hand and affects the linguistic features of the Persian language.

### **Persian proverbs**

A proverb is ‘a culturally situated statement whose literal meaning is, by definition, not its actual meaning’ (Huber, 2013, p. 145). It is undeniable how much beauty and brevity proverbs add to any text. Using a proverb in an appropriate time in the story expedites the transference of the intended message and saves the speakers much time and effort in communication. Compared to some other figures of speech such as idiomatic and metaphorical expressions, proverbs and proverbial expressions are advantages. The reason is that even if no exact English proverb can be found as their equivalent, their intended meaning is often easily perceivable by the simple translation of their corresponding words into English. The writer can easily use almost any foreign proverb by simply translating it into English, unless the proverb has allegorical roots or a cultural event behind it, of which readers lack awareness. Therefore, instead of leaving out the proverb altogether, in most cases, the writer can trust that the intended meaning is conveyed anyway because the audience will still understand what it implies, something they cannot do with an idiom or a metaphor, for example. Take the following pairs of proverbs which have equivalent meanings in both Persian and English:

- (1) Neighbour’s hen is a goose. / Grass is always greener on the other side of fence.
- (2) To take cumin to Kerman. / To carry coals to Newcastle.

- (3) To send someone after a black chick pea. / To send someone on a wild goose chase.
- (4) Like an apple cut in half. / Like two peas in a pod.
- (5) Two hundred sayings are not worth half a deed. / Actions speak louder than words.

Proverbs such as the above take position in Group  $\beta$  of the figures of speech. An English reader does not exactly need to be reminded of the English equivalent in the story to understand the original Persian proverb. Besides, a story's characters do not start uttering proverbs to each other out of nowhere in real life situations. There is always a rich context surrounding the scene, as well as pre and post dialogue in the story, giving plenty more information and awareness and assisting in the understanding of the proverb in use. Writers have the choice of a few options. They can translate the exact Persian proverb into English and use its translated form instead of an equivalent English proverb, in case there happens to be one, like the above-mentioned examples. The reason for using this option is that each proverb has its own beauty, richness, and flavour such that it would be beneficial for any reader from any cultural background to feel the aesthetics of proverbs in different languages. Easy-to-understand proverbs are a joy to work with, as there is no need for further explanation from the side of the author. However, depending on the proverb used in the Persian context aside from its translation, it is sometimes necessary to add extra explanatory information to make the proverb perfectly clear. This is often the case if the proverb is carrying a heavy load of cultural and traditional enrichment, and cultural diversity can create obstacles in readers' understanding.

Nonetheless, regardless of how long the list of the above analogically close proverbs might be, having the best equivalent(s) is not always an asset in resolving the hurdle of these cultural signifiers. The reason is the dissimilarity of the connotative meaning and identity associated with each concept across cultures. Take another example of a Persian proverb:

- (6) When the water flows upwards the frog sings 'Abou Ata'.

This is an example of a proverb which can use some additional help, preferably from the surrounding context of its use in the story. The writer needs to make sure the adjacent neighbouring dialogue and description make it crystal clear what the proverb means. The actual meaning of this proverb is that: usually water runs downhill and frogs make their ordinary ‘ribit, ribit’ sound, but if things happen to be going so unexpectedly awkward and chaotic that the water flows uphill, then you can expect a frog to sing a famous Persian song called *Abou Ata* instead of making its ordinary sound. In this example, the only problematic word would be *Abou Ata* and that is because of its cultural root and connotation in Persian, and that is why more clarification might be required, especially if the proverb is to be used in isolation which deprives the reader from receiving any help from the surrounding matrix.

Still, some Persian proverbs can become even more puzzling and require proper governing by the writer if their use is essential and inevitable in the narrative. The following is one such example.

(7)        There remains Ali and his water pool.

The exact translation of the Persian proverb does not give the whole picture to the Western reader about what the intended message is. This is one of the many cases where there is a cultural, historical, or religious story behind the proverb. As Aldebyan states, ‘the real meanings of proverbs and their original stories are obviously worthy of a great deal of consideration while translating’ (2008, p. 304). The religious story behind the proverb is that Imam Ali has a holy pool in paradise whose water has divine supernatural qualities. He will be giving drinks from this holy water to the good but not to the evil. Once this news was announced among people, someone stated that with the number of good people decreasing and evil people increasing, on Judgement Day, there will remain Ali and his water pool, because he hasn’t had any good people to give water to.

It is worth mentioning one last group of proverbs that are the exact same proverbs shared by both Persian and English speakers, with minor syntactic differences. These may have originally belonged in each language or been transferred from one language into the other – or maybe others – by the means of

borrowing sometime in the past. This group comprises only a limited number of proverbs some of which are:

- (8) One is not to count a gift horse's teeth. / Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.
- (9) A wolf in sheep's clothing.
- (10) To hit two targets with one arrow. / To kill two birds with one stone.
- (11) Pigeons with pigeons, hawks with hawks, birds of the same type fly together. / Birds of a feather flock together.
- (12) To make a mountain out of a piece of hay. / To make a mountain out of a molehill.
- (13) To arrive late is better than not arriving ever. / Better late than never.
- (14) To hear from one ear and throw it out from the other. / In one ear and out the other.

Cross-cultural writers have had their share of including Persian proverbs in their literary works in different ways. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, while narrating her first marriage which was arranged, Nafisi uses a Persian proverb to describe what is commonly known as a woman's doomed and uncontrollable destiny and lack of authority in wedlock:

- (15) He refused to divorce me ("A woman enters her husband's home in her [white] wedding gown and leaves it in her [white] shroud"). He had underestimated me. (2003, p. 100)

Within double quotation marks, Nafisi has inserted a clear and easily understandable proverb, which needs no further explanation or annotation.<sup>40</sup> The next example from Susanne Pari's *The Fortune Catcher* is a case of word-for-word translation of the Persian proverb '*feel o fenjoon*'. It implies the union of

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<sup>40</sup> Some Persian speakers also add the colour 'white' before the two types of fabric to also emphasise an additional analogical connection between a wedding dress and a shroud, which Nafisi has left out, since the colour concept is indirectly implied.

two opposites in terms of size and body mass, and how odd it is in the eyes of the public:

- (16) We cannot communicate, do not think in the same way; we walk side by side like an elephant and a teacup: completely different. (1997, p. 42)

Pari's sufficient contextual information leaves no ambiguity about the intended meaning of this proverb.

Following are a few of Mandanipour's applications of proverbs in *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*:

- (17) "Sir! If it weren't for my prayers, you'd be long dead, you'd have rotted through a hundred shrouds by now." (2009, p. 202).
- (18) And then, conforming to an Iranian proverb, he has two legs, he borrows two more and runs. (2009, p. 222)
- (19) [B]oys and girls ... according to an old Iranian proverb, are like cotton and fire and if left alone, will destroy not only themselves but their house and home as well. (2009, p. 282)

*To have rotted through a hundred shrouds* (also said as 'seven shrouds') is a Persian proverb which is a paraphrase of the second clause of example (17): 'you'd be long dead'. To make the proverb crystal clear, Mandanipour's explanation precedes the proverb, in this example. In (18) and (19), he directly indicates his use of an Iranian proverb before stating it. In Persian *having two legs and borrowing two more* indicates someone's great need of escape from an unpleasant situation, which needs no further explanation. In (19), which is also quoted on page 104 in the previous chapter, he adds an extra sentence to the proverb to clear any ambiguity that might remain in the reader's mind. Moreover, the extra contextual information, before and after the proverb within the text, always assists in understanding the proverb's meaning. In the following, Seraji too adds an extra sentence to guarantee the perception of the proverb:

- (20) Ahmad says that if Faheemeh's brothers learned that he fancied their sister, they'd make his ears the biggest parts of his body – meaning that they would cut him into little pieces. (2009, p. 11)

Even without the additional sentence, it is apparent that it would be impossible to enhance someone's ears. Therefore, severing the other body parts to make them smaller than one's ears would obviously make the most sense. And even though the exaggeration (hyperbole) is clear in this example, the message of the proverb is clear: severe punishment awaiting a wrongdoer.

Below is an example of a Group  $\alpha$  proverb used by Firouz in *In the Walled Gardens*:

- (21) I'm the kind who looks a gift horse in the mouth. Three years ago I realized he had a mistress. Unlike the generation of my parents who had arranged marriage, I couldn't shrug it off. I hadn't been educated for this. (Firouz, 2002, p. 34)

She uses a completely domestic (everyday) proverb in English which luckily exists in Persian as well, thus she is certain of its complete clarity in both languages and cultures. In dealing with foreign proverbs, Aldebyan (2008) stresses the fact that no translation can capture all their 'implications and entailments in English', basically 'because of the cultural barrier and cultural gap that ... are almost impossible to bridge' (p. 142).

In *Yousef's Sooreh* there is abundant use of proverbs, however, depending on the nature of each and based on which category they belong to, they had to be treated differently to be comprehensible. Some have been a blessing, since they require almost no extra explanation of any kind:

- (22) 'Don't you know *we can close any gate but not people's mouths?* ...' (p. 80)
- (23) 'I hate *to sprinkle salt on your wound* ...' (p. 237)
- (24) 'Now I know why business and pleasure, work and women should not be mixed. *They're like oil and water.*' (p. 130)

- (25) ‘Unless you can tolerate this adventurous session of ours *until grass grows under your feet*, you’ll give me an honest answer.’ (p. 216)

Example (22) is as clear as a proverb can be. Likewise (23) and (24), for which an identical equivalent proverb exists in English, have been easily used in their Persian form to preserve the cultural variation. In example (25) there is a semi-identical English proverb with the same meaning and only slight variation in syntax and verb tense. Therefore, in cases like these, the meaning is easily conveyed.

Other proverbs are still easy to grasp, yet not as straightforward as the above group. As such, either an equivalent domestic proverb in English, when available, has been brought somewhere into the proximity of the Persian proverb, or an annotation of some type, or glossing has been used to clarify any possible obscurity. Following are a few examples:

- (26) ‘Sis, like they say, I hate “to be a wet blanket” and *ayeye ya’s khoondan*, *recite the disappointment verse*, but please think rationally ...’ (p. 147)
- (27) ‘... It is the misery I’ve had to put up with all my life. *You have your hands on the flames from a distance*. Others get the warmth, while I get the burns.’ (p. 237)
- (28) ‘You’re her father, and as they say, *both the beard and the scissors are in your hands*, but in all honesty, what this courageous young man is suggesting makes sense to me.’ (p. 278)

In examples (26), a domestic English proverb with the exact same meaning has been added to make sure there are no readers who might be left in the dark. In examples (27) and (28), some extra explanations have been provided. Moreover, in this novel the Persian proverbs are all italicised. This kind of signalling is intended to elicit and activate nuanced reading sensors in the readers, requiring extra mindfulness and attentiveness upon spotting these figures of speech. Therefore, in *Yousef’s Sooreh*, whenever possible and within a reasonable range, attempts have been made in bringing in as many cultural nuances as possible.

### **Persian similes and metaphors**

‘Simile and metaphor’, according to Richards, Platt, and Weber (1985), are ‘the two most common figures of speech’ (p. 105), and according to Tajalli (2003), ‘they are the most basic’ (p. 101). The resemblance between simile and metaphor makes them nearly interchangeable. The fine line is that simile deals with illustrations which are prone to more vivid imagery than metaphor (Hawkes, 1972), and also is much easier to understand.<sup>41</sup> Metaphorical expressions have long been recognised as one of the most problematic parts of a language (Dobrzyńska, 1995; Junghare, 1982; Sadeghian & Fesharaki, 2013; Schäffner, 2004; Singh, 2010). Linguists and translators unanimously believe that it is highly unlikely for a metaphor – or other culturally loaded figures of speech – to translate into another language in a precisely flawless way (Aldebyan, 2008; Al-Najjar, 1984; Huber, 2013; Jughare, 1982; Schäffner, 2004). In light of this, metaphors often become problematic, since ‘transferring them from one language and culture to another may be hampered by linguistic and cultural differences’ (Schäffner, 2004, p. 1253). This is again one of the many intersections where culture and linguistics cross paths, proving once again that culture and language – as also indicated by Aldebyan (2008), Bassnett (1980), McQuilkin (1980), and Nida (1993) – are inseparable.

As a basic rule, because of the indispensable accompanying signifiers (‘as ... as’, ‘as if/though’, and ‘like’), similes are more easily recognised and their base of comparison between the two entities can be associated and perceived, compared to metaphors. However, from the perspective of cross-cultural writing, what makes these figures of speech – especially metaphors – problematic is that the base of comparison or the similarity is either culture specific or shared by some cultures and not all. Some can be as clear as the following:

- (1) He eats like a cow. (Persian simile)
- (2) He eats like a horse. (English simile)

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<sup>41</sup> Except for these two characteristics, there is no notable difference in their linguistic role in regard to conveyance of meaning. As such, they will both be considered and treated the same in this section.

Regardless of the difference between (1) and (2), the foreign reader will not have much difficulty getting the message, mostly due to the resemblance of the two animals.

Yet, not all similes are this straightforward. As another example, in Eastern cultures the moon is an entity, to which a person's face is most often compared in terms of beauty. Just as the moon outshines the surrounding darkness at night, so does a beautiful face, which is bright, prominent, and noticeable, compared with other ordinary faces. In fact this association is so strong that 'the moon' is often labelled as the symbol of beauty in Persian literature and language.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in Arabic literature, as Moreh (1988) states, '[e]very beautiful face is a full moon (*badr*)' (p. 46). In his non-fiction *Iran: My Grandfather* (2010), Alizadeh uses the same analogy when describing the stunning beauty of Tahmineh:<sup>43</sup>

- (3) She had a face like the moon, and looked like a *pari*, an angel of paradise.  
(p. 206)

Still, even though no such likeness is customary in Western literature – and in fact it might even imply roundness and fatness at first, rather than brightness, prominence and noticeability – with all the surrounding contextual information provided by the author, the popular audience learns the intended connection the writer is making and understands the foreign simile.

In a similar way, as well as the readers' prior familiarity with the protagonist's appearance, in *Yousef's Sooreh*, we read in Fakhri's greetings to Soo when she sees the heroine for the first time:

- (4) '*Salaam be rooye maahet!* Hello to your moonlike face! My goodness, I've never seen a face so bright or so beautiful.' (p. 244)

Soo's face is likened to the moon in its stunning beauty and brightness. In the above two instances, both Alizadeh and I choose the foreignisation with our intentional use of a Persian simile, instead of familiarisation or domesticising our phrase by replacing it with a Western simile like 'as pretty as a picture'. In our view, by bringing the reader closer to the culture, the work becomes richer and

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<sup>42</sup> See footnote 44 about symbols.

<sup>43</sup> Tahmineh is a character in Ferdowsi's classic epic, *Shahnameh* (1010/2007).

more informative. Following are a couple of other Persian similes used in *Yousef's Sooreh*:

- (5) Soo looks in amazement as he climbs up the three-metre front wall of the house using a rope, in a matter of seconds, as if done by a lizard. (p. 97)
- (6) Passing by the children, whose heads turn towards them like sunflowers following the sun, they reach a closed door up on the second level. (p. 254)

Both similes in examples (5) and (6) are easy to absorb, but with a slight difference. While the first mirrors an exact English simile 'as nimble as a lizard', the second does not have a common, domestic equivalent in English. Thus, the neighbouring extra information has been added to assist with this Persian simile.

### **Persian idioms**

Idioms are by far the most complex figures of speech simply because while something is literally said, figuratively something else is meant that cannot be deciphered by the meaning of its constituent words. It is saying something while meaning a completely different thing, and as such they are exceptionally challenging for foreigners (Adkins, 1968; Al-Najjar, 1984; Andrianova, 2013; Bateni, 2010; Scott, 1964; Sewell, 1987). 'Idioms are ... tricky: in English, it rains cats and dogs; in French, it rains in ropes; and in Russian, rain pours from a bucket' (Andrianova, 2013, p. 230–231). As children, native speakers of a language pick up idioms later on in life when they have already obtained a good grasp of their mother tongue, and so it is not surprising that the same process happens in much later stages of language learning for speakers of other languages. Putting aside – momentarily – the fact that speech acts as a whole institution are problematic when bridging two cultures, idioms further problematise the transference of the whole apparatus of speech acts. Mainly because the whole language as a communication system goes under questions and changes into gibberish when its constituents (words) do not mean what they customarily do. As Sewell (1987) puts it, by 'translating idioms word for word' one would actually 'make nonsense of them' (p. 70). Nonetheless, great attempts have been made in learning and teaching idiom as a way of filling the cultural gaps between the nations. As such, they are of prime importance and comprise an

indispensable part of cross-cultural studies. In his *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said asserts the same concept:

For the Orient idioms became frequent, and these idioms took firm hold in European discourse. Beneath the idioms there was a layer of doctrine about the Orient; this doctrine was fashioned out of the experiences of many Europeans, all of them converging upon such essential aspects of the Orient as the Oriental character, Oriental despotism, Oriental sensuality, and the like. (p. 203)

The literal and figurative meanings of some Persian idioms are listed in the following table.

**Persian idioms**

<b>Literary translation into English</b>	<b>Figurative meaning in English</b>
To grow horns	To be stunned out of disbelief
To put a hat on someone's head To pick up someone's hat To rub syrup on someone's head	To trick, deceive, or swindle someone
One's father came out	One went through hell and suffered a lot
To the grave of someone's father!	To hell with someone!
One is salty	One is cute and lovely

### **Suggestions and solutions for figures of speech**

What to do and what not to do with figures of speech has been controversially debated and scrutinised, and so far in this study a number of approaches have been pointed out while discussing each. Unlike mere translation and what translators go through, there is relatively more light at the end of the tunnel for cross-cultural writers in their deployment of these figures of speech. However, before directing this towards creative writing and viewing it from the point of view of this research, some practical tactics, hints, and key factors on how to deal

with some figures of speech from the experts in the field is deemed to be beneficial. Among the notable methods employed, a few common ones are: literal translation, paraphrase, substitution, omission, footnote, and annotation, all of which fall into two main categories of foreignisation and familiarisation.

In regard to proverbs, Berman (1985/2000) argues that '[t]o play with "equivalence" is to attack the discourse of the foreign work' (p. 295). In his view, even if the proverb has an equal (identical) match (or more than one) in the target culture, it will not do. '[T]hese equivalents do not translate it. To translate is not to search for equivalences' (2000, p. 295). The reason is that even the perfectly matched lexical equivalents can somehow provoke dissimilar concepts and/or mental images in peoples across cultures – and sometimes even in the same people within a specific culture. Some of the most basic and well-known terminologies such as love, respect, and 'politeness' (Sharifian, 2013), to name a few, can in fact mean different things to members of different communities and nations (p. 92). Therefore, even proverbs in Group  $\beta$  do not necessarily connote the same meaning. Still they are the closest a cross-cultural writer can find and resort to when there is an absolute need for such borrowing in the narrative. All in all, the majority of researchers defend the idea of foreignisation and hold positive views in favour of preserving and maintaining the flavour of the source language whose cultural context is under scrutiny in the literary work. They, therefore, encourage and support the utilization as well as translation of figures of speech as close as possible to the source language with as little distortion and deletion as possible. In dealing with idioms and the relative clash between the two cultures, Dong (2010) offers the use of annotation and paraphrase, regardless of the fact that annotation and paraphrase lose the fun and flavour of idiomatic expression. These, he believes, will decrease the level of cultural untranslatability of idioms to a significant degree, so that the product of translation will bring out a satisfactory degree of emotion and closeness similar to that in the source language.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Due to word limitations, and since I did not come across significant issues in regard to 'symbols' in *Yousef's Sooreh* or other texts used in this research, this discussion has been left out. For more information on this topic, see Ordudari (2008) and Vahid Dastjerdi and Madah Shoorche (2011).

### **Persian figures of speech in cross-cultural fiction**

I now divert the discourse to how figures of speech relate to this research, where there is actually a silver lining. One way to clear such barriers is to avoid using figures of speech altogether in the narrative. After all, they are not a must, rather ornamental linguistic entities that add aesthetic value to the writing, all of which can be compromised if need be. But where this factual conception concerns the field of cross-cultural writing is its influence on readership. For one thing, their abundant usage in daily conversation between the native speakers of Persian makes this a difficult and unreasonable choice for a cross-cultural writer who will usually not sacrifice authenticity to the convenience gained by avoidance. Besides, this will deprive readers of some valuable cultural, political, religious, racial, and ethnic information they are often keen to obtain. It is highly probable that these anomalies are what attracts a reader to pick up a foreign-set novel in the first place. Thus, it is crystal clear that leaving them out altogether is not a reasonable or strategic option.

Wardhaugh also shares this view that these linguistic specificities and attributes are representatives of how different cultures are, and unless they are compared, contrasted, and analysed, the existing nuances and gaps between different cultures cannot be discovered (1986). In a way, discarding them will take out the core essence of the body of the literary work, and leave it hollow. '[F]igures of speech are the soul and spirit of the literature as [they add] variety, beauty, flavour and various colors and shades to the writing' (Nezami, 2012, p. 676). Along the same lines, Perrine (1970) believes that although any type of figurative language might be misleading and misinterpreted by the reader, 'the risk is well worth taking' (p. 584), and that if translated appropriately 'the dividends are immense. Fortunately all people have imagination to some degree, and imagination can be cultivated. By practice one's ability to interpret figures of speech can be increased' (p. 584).

Writing is in a sense a kind of translation. Having said that, when contriving a cross-cultural fiction there is some light at the end of the tunnel, all of which derive from the author's freedom. Unlike translators, whose hands are tied by the original source work, writers have the liberty to design the narrative as they

please. This gives them ample opportunities to select whichever figures of speech they like to use and however they want to apply them in their fiction in the target language. As already shown in the examples, cross-cultural writers of fiction and non-fiction have had various approaches to reflect these nuanced peculiarities in their writing in English, and the majority of their strategic techniques have worked well in conveying the cultural-linguistic message to Western readers. The only distinguishing factor is the writers' positioning of their literary work on the continuum which bridges the two cultures of East and West. In other words, how much distance from each culture the writer decides to posit his/her creation is the determining factor (nativisation/familiarisation vs denativisation/foreignisation). This decision will govern the degree of challenge required in dealing with these linguistic hurdles and how comprehensible and rational the work will be.

This question is addressed by Croce (1902/1992) in his hypothesis on aesthetics vs loyalty or what he calls 'ugly but faithful, or beautiful but faithless' (p. 76). Is the writer's informativeness worth jolting the readers and pushing them out of their comfort zone? Where is the balance or the borderline in creating a culturally saturated and informative literary work, and at the same time not disturbing the Western cultural and linguistic standards and norms the English reader is accustomed to? Should the writer disturb the expected smooth journey by designing a bumpy road full of unfamiliar ambiguous novelties? Would the reader like this challenge? How far deep into this ocean of cultural and linguistic diversity is the reader willing to be thrown? Undoubtedly, each has its own advantages and disadvantages.

I agree with Nezami (2012) that '[u]sing original figures of speech in our writing is a way to convey meanings in fresh and unexpected ways. They can help our readers understand and stay interested in what we have to say' (p. 659). I think as long as the reader is not kept in the dark about the foreign cultural and linguistic features, the application of figures of speech as close as possible to the source language is not only harmless but in fact indispensable. Readers with less cultural awareness gain a great deal of knowledge through these new similes, metaphors, symbols, and proverbs used in a cross-cultural novel. I think these figures of speech should not be held back or taken out of the narrative, and

neither should they be altered or replaced by a similar one in English, as much as possible.

The only figure of speech that is an exception here is the ‘idiom’ which is in most definite need of omission or replacement by an English equivalent. Idioms’ syntactic construction, having been made of a string of words which in ordinary cases mean a customary familiar concept to the reader, but in its idiomatic figurative sense mean something else, cannot give anything new to the reader. There is no story or cultural element behind an idiom, from which the reader will learn something new. Foreign idioms will only confuse and puzzle the unfamiliar reader. Besides, some of them – especially the ones in Group  $\gamma$  – will backfire and damage the narrative by creating a wrong connotation. As an Example, the Persian idiom ‘a salty person’ means ‘a cute and lovely person’ figuratively when used by an Iranian character. However, the same idiom has an English equivalent which means nearly the opposite to that of the Persian idiom: ‘an angry, upset, mean, or annoying person’ when used in a Western context. Therefore, it is best to leave out the Persian idioms when crafting a cross-cultural narrative.

### **Lexical components, the lack of exact equivalents, and untranslatable terms**

Throughout the narrative texts (fiction and non-fiction) studied and analysed for this research, the use of Persian (or foreign) terminology has been documented. Cross-cultural writers, mostly in English for this dissertation, have made sporadic, yet significant use of these terms in their literary works, and by various methods. Basically, foreign words used in English texts can be divided into three groups. A limited number of them fall into the category of untranslatable words where the most help is required from the author, while some are easily interchangeable with an existing English equivalent. Still, a great number of them are within the grey area somewhere within the continuum. In this latter case some assistance, in the form of annotation, loan word, glossing, calque, explanation, or footnote, to name the most common, is needed from the author to alleviate confusion. To this end, writers have at times had the same way of tackling this issue, while at other times, have each used their own individualistic method. In

fact, even the same authors have not maintained a solid, untransmutable strategy and sometimes had various routes of dealing with the same word in their own writing. This is because they make their choices in terms of what will work best for their narrative at a specific point.

In cases where there is a lack of equivalent, the missing word is later added to the lexicon as a loan word. This is done by means of borrowing the word just as it is phonologically said in the donor language and writing it using the alphabet and the typographical rules of the recipient language. Some words like Chinese ‘wok’, Japanese ‘haiku’, Russian ‘samovar’, French ‘chef’, Italian ‘pizza’, German ‘kindergarten’, Middle Eastern ‘tandoor’ and ‘kebab’, or Persian ‘sandal’, ‘shawl’, ‘lemon’, ‘bazaar’, ‘bulbul’, ‘dervish’, ‘kilim’, and ‘pyjamas’, are well recognised and used loan words in English, which have become a part of English vocabulary. But even with widespread borrowing certain words remain untranslatable into another, host language. These words are not specific to any language. They exist across languages and especially in those which share fewer similarities. For example, the untranslatable Russian word *pochemuchka* means ‘a person who asks too many questions’ in English; the untranslatable Italian *cualacino* means ‘the mark left on a table by a cold glass’ in English; the untranslatable Japanese *Bakku-shan* means ‘a woman who looks attractive, but only if people view her from behind and not face to face’ in English.

In Persian, too, there are certain words with traditional and cultural origins for which no one-to-one English equivalent can be found. Some, like *ta’arof*, *namous*, and *aberu*, have been extensively explored in the previous chapter. Yet, there are still others such as the Persian *aftabeh*, *sofreh*, *hoz*, *khoncheh*, *chelleh*, *hana-bandoon*, *patakhti*, *mohr*, or *korsee* that need further explanation if used in the narrative because they are culture-specific and known only by a certain group of people in a specific community, using the same language. One thing to keep in mind, however, is that the word ‘untranslatable’ does not imply that it is impossible to convey the congruent meaning of certain words to a speaker of a foreign language, but rather the possibility that it might takes lines, paragraphs, or even pages of detailed explanation to make it happen, as has been the case for the Persian words *ta’arof* and *namous*. However, this is only the case for a small

group of words. In a creative writing text, as shown in the examples, most of these words can be conveyed by action, attitude, dialogue, and other creative strategies of language narrative, in which case they do not take up much of the narrative space.

### **Persian untranslatable terms in contemporary writing**

Unlike the native Persian, who will instantly relate to untranslatable words in any Persian or English novel, it is hardly ever the case with the foreign audience. I should also add here that dealing with figures of speech as well as untranslatable foreign words is always less complicated in a multi-cultural novel, where characters come from different ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. In these novels, such as James Buchan's *The Persian Bride*, there is at least one non-native, Western character (Buchan's main protagonist in this case). The required explanatory information can be exchanged directly between the native and non-native character(s) through dialogue without sounding awkward and losing authenticity. The following is an excerpt from this romance novel. A few native Persian characters in the novel explain the foreign word *sigheh* to the protagonist, John, who is a British man working as a teacher in Iran and does not know the meaning of *sigheh*:

“Take a goddam sigheh, man.” ...

“What’s a sigheh?”

“A concubine ...”

“... a chick ...”

“... for love only, not for marriage ...”

“But not from the class, dear John, or I shall release you.” (1999, p. 11)

The fact that John is not native in Persian provides this opportunity for the writer to explain the problematic word through a short dialogue between two characters – John and his boss. In a cross-cultural text, where the characters share the same background, the writer does not have this option and has to find a way to fit the information into the writing in a subtle, indirect way. Describing these terminologies overtly in the dialogue would not be effective, because these words are well known to the Persian characters.

Another possible way of handling these terms is demonstrated in the following example from *Yousef's Sooreh*:

‘As you know, the sharia law requires *eddeh*, a three-month waiting period between the couple, before the divorce is finalised, lest any new pregnancies go unnoticed and unaccounted for.’ (p. 266)

The above are Ebrahim’s words to Soo about the untranslatable word *eddeh*. Phrases such as ‘As you know’, ‘Don’t you know’, ‘You know that’, ‘Remember that’, ‘I don’t need to remind you that’, and the like can be useful means for the writer to bring into dialogue enough annotations without making the dialogue sound unnatural. These phrases act as reminders to the native speaker who is supposed to already know the word but might have accidentally or intentionally overlooked or ignored it.<sup>45</sup>

Generally, dialogue is not the most effective place for an untranslatable word. Within description the writer has far fewer restrictions. Another example from *Yousef's Sooreh* will explain this:

Khanom Jaan brings in a tray with a small charcoal-grill, on which the seeds of *esfand*, wild rue, are popping, traditionally known to keep the evil eyes away from the happy occasion, and especially from her two beloved grandchildren. (p. 81)

In the above excerpt, the necessary explanation about *esfand* is fitted in the description. In addition to the immediate glossing of the literal definition of the plant, its usage, its method of preparation, along with the supernatural purpose it serves, are included in the surrounding sentences. A similar method is used in the next two examples from the same novel when dealing with two other untranslatable terms, namely ‘*patakhti*’ and ‘*sadagheh*’:

- (1) Except to allow the bride to take part in her *patakhti* – a ladies-only ceremony on the following day to celebrate the consummation of marriage – it is not unusual for the bride and groom to spend all their time together alone during the post-wedding period. (p. 187)

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<sup>45</sup> The Persian word *eddeh* has a second meaning, which is equivalent to ‘a number of’ in English, and hence translatable in this sense.

- (2) But Khanom Jaan first comes forward repeating some mantras, and places some cash notes on her small Qur'an, to later be given away to the poor as *sadagheh* – a special type of alms believed to keep calamities away. (p. 283)

Following are a few other untranslatable Persian words I have come across while reviewing the literature for this research. Each writer has their unique way of dealing with them within their strategies of narrative:

- (3) We have a typical Iranian house with a modest yard, a large guest room, and a *hose*—a small pool in the front yard. (Seraji, 2009, p. 5)
- (4) *Aftabeh* is the Farsi word for one of the world's most indispensable objects. This instrument is very similar to the watering can Western ladies use to water their gardens, and we Muslims use it to wash the flowers of our body after relieving ourselves. (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 207)
- (5) She ... began praying, touching her head to the *mohr* – a clay tablet – she had placed on the ground. (Amirrezvani, 2007, p. 150)
- (6) [H]is hand grasped a *tasbeeh*, a string of prayer beads ... (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006, p. 88)

I need to elaborate that in example (6), the word 'prayer beads' is the closest English equivalent to the Persian *tasbeeh*. Yet they differ in that a *tasbeeh*, in its customary full size, has exactly a hundred beads. It also does not have a hanging cross attached to it, which is what Christian's prayer beads (rosaries) have. Moreover, there is the non-detachable underlying religious implication that prevents each word from rendering to interchangeability with the other. The following shows how *tasbeeh* has been used in *Yousef's Sooreh* with the strategy of glossing:

- (7) 'Never mind, let's just go ...,' says Soo, panting as she removes from her purse a *tasbeeh*, the Islamic rosary, a string of one hundred prayer beads used for counting mantra, and starts whispering them. (p. 13)

First, there is the mention of the closest, most tangible object to this Persian word. It is then differentiated from 'prayer beads' and 'rosary' by the exact number of

beads a full-sized *tasbeeh* contains, and what it is used for. Since it can be deduced that an Islamic object of prayer does not have a cross, adding this information is deemed unnecessary. After this first introduction, there is no further treatment of the word *tasbeeh* in the other occasions of its use throughout the novel.

Writers deal with religious terms in different ways. Below are two examples from Anahita Firouz's *In the Walled Gardens* and Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen* where both writers talk about the same religious concept, *azahn*. However, while Firouz mentions both the Persian transliterated word and its English equivalent, enriching the text with more authenticity, Crowther leaves out the Persian:

- (8) [S]he could hear the *azahn*, from the mosque down the street, the call for prayer ... (Firouz, 2002, p. 23)
- (9) A call to prayer sang out from the minaret, echoing off the marble courtyards and mosaic domes. (Crowther, 2006, p. 263)

Similarly, in the following, Mahbod Seraji uses the Persian word *Jen* accompanied by an annotation, while an exact equivalent, 'jinn', does exist for it in English. Not all writers though use his technique:

- (10) The superstitious soldier threw his gun down and started to run toward the gate of the barracks, screaming, "It's a *Jen*, it's a *Jen*!" which means an evil spirit or devil. (Seraji, 2009, p. 119)
- (11) All of a sudden, he jumped off his cushion as if he had been startled by a jinn. (Amirrezvani, 2007, p. 111)

Mahbod Seraji's eagerness and desire in bringing the Persian word into his fiction is evident in example (9), even though this has required clarifying it by giving additional explanation. In *The Blood of Flowers*, however, Anita Amirrezvani uses only the English equivalent without any mention of the Persian word in example (11).

There are times in these cross-cultural works when a word has been used with more than one meaning, only one of which is untranslatable. In the following examples, homonyms (words with identical spelling and pronunciation but different meanings) are used by two different Iranian authors:

- (12) I looked out and noticed a new *hejleh*, a kiosk-shaped shrine, on the footpath outside a mosque.’ (Alizadeh, 2008, p. 87)
- (13) In traditional Iranian weddings it was customary ... to send the bride and groom hand in hand to a room known as the *hejleh*, or the nuptial chamber.’ (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 291)

My novel for this thesis uses the homonyms similarly:

- (14) ‘... We took care of the groom in the yard, just before he went in the *hejleh*. ...’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 189)
- (15) ‘... How will he ever find out that the most-talked-about wedding in the community ended in the Rustin bride’s disappearance from the *hejleh*?’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 194)
- (16) ‘So, was her escape from the *hejleh* because of the disgraceful remark you made a few minutes ago about her and me? ...’ (*Yousef’s Sooreh*, p. 217)

Among the above five examples, taking into account the fact that corpse is never buried inside the *hejleh*, not even temporarily, the Persian word in Alizadeh’s example (12) is untranslatable. Similar to certain words in English such as ‘light’, ‘saw’, ‘match’, ‘sink’, ‘type’, to name a few, the Persian word ‘*hejleh*’ means two different things and the meaning can only be determined within the context. Yet, there is an interesting socio-cultural congruence that links these two words together which might well be the pragmatic reason behind their homonymic character. Considering that many martyrs were young virgin men who lost their lives in the battle field and as such would never have a *hejleh* (the nuptial chamber) in this earthly life, each martyr would be assigned a *hejleh* (the kiosk) outside his house or in front of the mosque in his community and sometimes a number of them in the streets of the suburb where he used to live. This notion is an ancient Persian myth. However, it came into the spotlight with its didactic

implication taught to the Iranian public by the post-revolutionary government to use this object as a symbolic monument in commemoration of the sacrifice the martyrs have made for their country and people. It was emphasised that their worldly desires will be gratified and rewarded by God in the eternal afterlife.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, since the religious protagonist's escape from the nuptial chamber marks the peak of the most abominable and reprehensible deed ever done throughout the storyline, there are a number of instances where the Persian '*hejleh*' is mentioned, but only in its translatable form where it means 'nuptial chamber' (as shown in examples 14, 15, and 16). For the same reason no glossing has been needed on such occasions. Moreover, as a basic rule, in this novel, such key words with cultural significance, which at the same time have an exact English equivalent, are only used in the dialogue, while their English term has been used in the description. Following is an example:

- (17)     Trays of food, refreshments, and snacks have been prepared in abundance, enough to last them [the bride and groom] a while, in case they prefer not to leave the bridal chamber for a few days. (p. 187)

### **Frequency and repetition of foreign lexical items**

As discussed in relation to my own novel, in the work of other writers, it is usually a basic rule that once the foreign word is introduced and dealt with in the narrative for the first time, in its consecutive usage – if the author decides to apply the same term again – no further treatment is provided:

- (1)     I remember the first *No-Rooz* after the Revolution; the first *New-Day* new year's celebration after the Islamists took power in Iran. (Alizadeh, 2008, p. 37)
- (2)     Uncle Behrooz was spending the *No-Rooz* with us since he had been banned from exiting the country to join his family in Moscow. (Alizadeh, 2008, pp. 38–39)

Excerpt (1) is Ali Alizadeh's first application of the word *No-Rooz*<sup>46</sup> in his novel. He uses this word a number of times again in the same book, in ways similar to example (2), such as on page 38, and again on pages 41, 42, 59, 73, etc. However, the treatment of the transliterated lexical item is only done on its first application (1). This is clearly done as a strategy to teach the word and has an impact on how this cross-cultural text is read. The same Persian word is used in *Yousef's Sooreh*, but only once.

- (3) '... Who else would anonymously send me birthday presents as well as *eidi* at *Norooz*, so that I'd have something to give to my children each year on their birthdays and the New Year? ...' (p. 229)

In (3) the treatment of foreign words (*eidi* and *Norooz*) is applied in the second part of the sentence. Still, there are other times when writers define the same foreign word more than once, most likely to ascertain the clarity of the key concepts on every single application of the lexical item:

- (4) [A] Supreme Islamic Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*) in place of a ... (Alizadeh, 2010, p. 179)
- (5) [A] religious Supreme Leadership (*velayat-e faqih*) as the head of state above the ... (Alizadeh, 2010, p. 212)

As shown in examples (4) and (5), Alizadeh in his book of non-fiction, *Iran: My Grandfather*, has used glossing to define the above same Persian expression twice on different occasions using different wordings. Clearly, there is a great deal of subjectivity in this area among writers and even within the methods used by the very same writer based on the contextual requirements of certain parts of narrative and genre in hand. Depending on which cultural aspect(s) the writers find more significance for conveyance, they would often invite the reader into the culture, customs, and traditions. Yet, there are other aspects which seem to be treated as less significant and about which only mere acknowledgement of dissimilarities are made in order to make them aware of the nuances. In either case, most often best attempts have been made to not exclude readers from entering into the culturally different arena of the narrative.

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<sup>46</sup> Also written as *Norooz*, *Noruz*, and the like by other authors.

- (6) In Iran, overriding authority rests with the supreme religious leader, under the doctrine of divine clerical right to rule, *velayat-e faqih*, invented and established by Ayatollah Khomeini. (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006, p. 153)

In (6), Shirin Ebadi mentions the same expression in her memoir, *Iran Awakening*, with the same wording as Ali Alizadeh's, yet by the means of annotation.

Other instances occur at times when an untranslatable Persian term is mentioned in the text, and each author applies their own artistic method in conveying its meaning:

- (7) A person traveling to another town will have innumerable locations available where he or she can ... eat around a family dinner cloth (*sofreh*) ... (Beeman, 1986, pp. 11–12)
- (8) [W]e gathered in front of the *sofreh aghd*, the traditional Iranian wedding spread. (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006, p. 26)
- (9) Yet there was no sign of either the Revolution or Religion to be seen on our *Sofreyeh No-Rooz*, our festive *New Day's Spread*. (Alizadeh, 2008, p. 38)

In (7), Beeman, coming from a Western background, calls the Persian *sofreh* a 'dinner cloth', whereas in (8) and (9), Shirin Ebadi and Ali Alizadeh with Persian ethnicity define it as a 'spread'. Both equivalents have their advantages as well as pitfalls. For a Persian, 'spread' is a better equivalent for *sofreh* for two reasons. Firstly, there already is a Persian word *roo meezi* as an ideal equivalent to the English 'dinner/table cloth'. Secondly, *sofreh* is most often used on the floor (or even on the ground) which is what 'spread' connotatively implies more than any other word in English. In fact, *sofreh* was and still is to be used on the floor in Persian households, even nowadays when many people sit at the table to dine. This is most likely why Beeman defines it as 'dinner cloth' instead of 'table cloth'. One more point to add is that while *sofreh* is most often used as a 'dining spread' for edibles at mealtimes, it is also used for other purposes, though only occasionally, as more of a decorative boundary marker. A 'wedding spread' or 'New Day's Spread' are two good examples used by Ebadi and Alizadeh, where

*sofreh* is used not for the customary dining purpose but rather as a spread on which a number of traditionally, spiritually, and symbolically valuable items are set with utmost decorum on certain notable occasions.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, there is ample use of the word *sofreh*. On the basis of their chronological appearance in the novel, some are listed below:

- (10) [S]*ofreye aghd*, the traditional wedding spread, set elegantly on the floor. (p. 4)
- (11) She watches in amazement as he spreads the *sofreh* on the rug and sets it up nicely with cutlery, dishes, and all the food. (p. 88)
- (12) She guides them into the drawing room where a *sofreh*, with all sorts of edibles and drinks in abundance, is nicely set up on several layers of high-end Persian rugs. (pp. 128–129)
- (13) A *sofreye aghd* is beautifully spread on the carpeted floor, containing their family Qur'an, a big mirror with two tall lamps in the shape of candlesticks, one on each side, two large sugar-cones wrapped in lace and ribbons, a bowl of water, some honey, and other symbolic items, all believed to be tokens of good omen for the new couple. (pp. 176–177)

Semi-glossing has been used in (10), when the untranslatable word is first introduced, followed by an annotation of the traditional and symbolic value of the spread. The less culturally-aware reader, who has earlier grasped the meaning of *aghd* (Persian for 'matrimony'), knows that this spread is related to the marriage ceremony as the Persian name *sofreye aghd* indicates, and hence it is not just a 'dinner cloth' as in the case of some other instances of its use. The contextual data in the other examples (11, 12, and 13) leaves no confusion, and thus no other glossing is necessary. Once the foreign word has been inculcated by gradual practice, it can be used in isolation similar to a loan word.

### **Persian transliterated word accompanied by its English equivalent glossing**

In regard to the words for which proper equivalents already exist in the target language, their application as intermittent words within the English text might

seem unusual as well as unnecessary. Selecting a proper word from the English vocabulary seems to be the most natural and reasonable way. However, in practice, that is often not the case. In fact, in most such narratives, there is abundant sprinkling of foreign words, even when the authors have had the English equivalent available at their service. The main point is that if the English word is used, the connotation is of English usage, so the cultural specificity of the foreign Persian is lost. Moreover, these foreign words have many effects such as cross-cultural dialogue and understanding for the popular audience. They are also aesthetically pleasing in the English text, and they help with the creation of voice in the narrative.

In the accompanying novel, *Yousef's Sooreh*, direct deployment of the transliterated Persian words into the English narrative has been indispensable, but not in a random and haphazard way. Firstly those words and phrases with a specific linguistic role have been treated this way, like in certain proverbs or prayers. Secondly, considering the highly emotive nature of the Persian language, this strategy has been applied whenever more emphatic type of dialogue was sought, and the mere English equivalents on their own could not convey the deep feelings attached to certain words. For example:

- (1) 'My God. You'd better not have failed in such a simple mission as getting her away from him. If he has touched her, *be Khoda*, I swear to God I'll —' (p. 188)
- (2) 'Get up, *dokhtaram*, my daughter,' says Ebrahim, bending down to bring her up to her feet. 'You're breaking *Baba's* heart.' (p. 261)
- (3) '*Khanome Raad*, Mrs Raad.' That's all he says to her at first and just watches her blush, chuckle, and look at him for a split second, before looking down again. 'Here's something I never thought I'd say or hear, and neither did anyone who knew me.' (pp. 283–284)

Example (1) is the protagonist's verbal attack on his team members around the peak of the rising action prior to the story's climax. By swearing to God, Joe threatens them that if their negligence has led to the consummation of marriage – something he has sent his men to prevent from happening – he would either kill

or punish them severely. This incident is towards the end of the story, and although swearing to God has appeared elsewhere in the narrative prolifically, this is the only time and place where its Persian transliterated *be Khoda* is brought into the text, alongside its flawless English equivalent. The application of the Persian form is to signify the gravity of the matter at stake and to emphasise the emotional and mental state of the protagonist at the time, in addition to positioning the audience at the most propinquity to the Iranian hero at the apotheosis of his devastation, anguish, and uncertainty. The reader is by now well aware of Soo's character and the story's major theme, pre-marital love, and can relate to Joe's determination and devotion to protect her; thus, the strategic deployment of the two as a unified binary is meant to convey a more emphatic connotation in this instance compared to its other, not-so-critical occurrences. Example (2) is uttered around one of the story's climaxes. It is to convey the peak of emotions between the protagonist and her father, who is one major antagonist in the storyline. None of the English equivalents, 'my daughter/my girl/my child' alone, would mirror the feelings with which he is addressing his beloved daughter who is crying at his feet. Instances like these are most proper places for the application of the foreign transliterated words. Likewise, example (3) is a part of the story's major climax, presenting the hero's first words to the heroine right after they unite. Though 'Mrs Raad' is a perfect equivalent to the Persian transliterated word, using them adjacently again emphasises the domestic and native feelings with which he is initiating a discourse with his love interest as his wife, hence placing the reader at more proximity with the thoughts and emotions of the characters.

### **Cross-cultural writers' choices and freedoms**

Most experts in lexicology agree with Lawal's statement that 'words change their colour and texture when they change their nativity' and consequently, the semantic domains of languages do not correspond, causing problems in cultural translation (1996, p. 67). In his discussion on literary translation of novels, Ndlovu (2000) highlights the criticality of the decisions the translator is obliged to make in terms of culturally loaded entities 'such as forms of greeting, naming characters and figurative language because he or she is familiar with the target

readership, and if the translation sounds too “foreign” and “strange” it might be rejected’ (2000, pp. 72–73). It gets even trickier, he believes, ‘where culture-specific elements have an impact on macrotextual aspects such as setting, theme and character portrayal’ (p. 73). In a parallel way, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) have also depicted the pros and cons in this respect, which is evident from their statement about glossing:

The problem with glossing in the cross-cultural text is that, at its worst, it may lead to a considerably stilted movement of plot as the story is forced to drag an explanatory machinery behind it. Yet in one sense virtually everything that happens or everything that is said can be ethnographic. A casual conversation can reveal a complex social structure. (p. 62)

Yet, in spite of the truth in all these observations, when dealing with cultural untranslatability, the universality of semantic concepts should not be disregarded. On the basis of a fundamental aspect in the Componential Analysis Theory in applied linguistics, there are certain ubiquitous concepts in semantic constituents which are independent of languages and shared across all cultures. In light of this, translators as well as cross-cultural writers can have much hope in resorting to these commonalities in getting past the linguistic impediments in making sense of the foreign. Moreover, as a general solution, cross-cultural writers can take advantage of the freedom they have in being extra careful and selective in their choice of foreign terminology. There are always less controversial words with lower degrees of cultural tinges to which writers can resort to in order to send the message across, and at the same time prevent ambiguity or bulky annotations. Undoubtedly, in cases where English language outweighs in the lexicon scale, this can be done swiftly with not much difficulty. But even when faced with the lack of proper equivalent or untranslatable terms, it is up to the writer to think analytically and evaluate the available choices. The application of a certain foreign word should be worth disturbing the harmony of the English text and the smooth journey, and if not it should be avoided. If foreignisation and ideal mirroring of the source culture is an important goal to the writer, then a perfect native literary work is most likely unachievable. In any case, ‘[t]he postcolonial text is always a complex and hybridised formation. It is inadequate to read it either as a reconstruction of pure traditional values or as

simply foreign and intrusive’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002, p. 110). It might never be ideal either way; yet, with proper craftsmanship and balance on the part of the writer, the product will most likely be gratifying and valuable.

### **Contradictions in terms and modes of address, forms, styles, prayers, profanity, and emotive attributes**

One of the fundamental aspects of translation when reflecting contextual specificities of the interlocutors is to preserve the form, style, and even tone of the utterances exchanged in each and every occasion and context when addressing each other. This is a common universal characteristic innate within the linguistic features of all languages. For, example, the English phrase ‘Good luck!’ depending on how it is said and the facial expressions of the speaker at the moment of utterance can either convey its denotative meaning, ‘I wish you success’, or its connotative meaning, ‘I don’t think you will succeed, because I have doubts about what you are about to do’.

However, regardless of this universality, the socio-linguistic dimensions that are constantly interacting with the linguistic attributes of each language bring into play considerable degrees of dissimilarity in this respect across languages. Some of them originate from the cultural, traditional, and religious foundations of each nation, as already discussed. Others, however, are linguistic-based, in a way that at a separate level, each language is innately equipped with certain linguistic tools and elements that are language-dependent, and by the help of which its speakers achieve determined functions in their communicative acts. This can be a burden to translators and cross-cultural writers alike due to the fact that the incongruent and contradictory nuances in linguistic aspects of any two languages can become overwhelmingly challenging. Maintaining the original form (formal, informal, colloquial, slang, and even offensive) – as also agreed by Junghare (1982) – is essential. But how to accomplish this with another (target) language’s linguistic equipment can become a challenge and even at times a futile attempt when one language lacks the compatible mapping of those elements. In such cases other routes are to be taken to that end.

A distinction is vital here between linguistic and cultural translation. In this dissertation I draw only on translation studies in formulating my discussion about cross-cultural diasporic writing, aiming to argue about the function of these translation issues in creative writing. Clearly, what I am performing in this dissertation and the accompanying novel is dealing with cultural translation into English, not necessarily linguistic translation. Although some linguistic translation is inevitable in transforming Persian culture into a text enacted in English, in-depth exploration of linguistic translation is outside the domain of this research. Moreover, some of the above mentioned areas that crop up for cross-cultural writers will only be touched upon briefly here. Due to the limitation in length, and also because in *Yousef's Sooreh* I did not encounter such issues, the full discussion has been left out of this research.

### **Terms and modes of address, forms, styles**

The voluminous nature of terms of address (including names, nicknames, intimate terms, job titles, religious terms, binary kinship terms, honorifics, personal pronouns, and attention-getters) in Persian compared to English has roots in the collective nature of these societies and the hierarchal system of individuals' status, as well as the indispensable social bonds.<sup>47</sup> In regard to language forms, Persian has in its grammatical construct two distinct forms of informal (colloquial) and formal (official) modes of address, manifested in both written and spoken versions of Persian (Beeman, 1986; Davis, 2011; Yarmohammadi, 1964). The former is mostly used among close friends, siblings (except when patriarchal rules indicate otherwise), and basically those with whom one is more intimate and on a first-name basis, whereas the latter is used in addressing certain people who are worthy of higher respect (Aliakbari & Toni, 2008; Archer & Minou-Archer, 1972; Davis, 2011; Seghatolislami, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 1964).

The foundation of this behaviour has roots in the fact that in the Iranian way of communication, deference is the utmost determining factor in choosing how to

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<sup>47</sup> A more thorough discussion on this topic can be found in Aliakbari and Toni (2008), Beeman (2001), Foster (1995), Izadi (2015), Minkov and Hofstede (2012), Modarresi-Tehrani (1978), and Yarmohammadi (1964).

address others in various contextual settings (Aliakbari & Toni, 2008; Beeman, 1976, 1986, 2001; Sharifian, 2008). This extra option creates more variety for Persian speakers to attune and customise their utterances on the basis of the social requisites (Aliakbari & Toni, 2008; Beeman, 1976, 2001; Izadi, 2015; Sharifian, 2008). The application of these two forms in Persian might create certain difficulties to cross-cultural writers. However, since in *Yousef's Sooreh* I have not encountered any such hindrances, and seemingly neither have other cross-cultural Persian writers under study in this research, this topic is not discussed further in this dissertation.<sup>48</sup>

About language styles (modes), as Modarresi-Tehrani (1978) puts it, '[s]tylistic variations in Persian are closely correlated with the speaker-hearer relation which can be assessed by factors such as age, social class, occupation, education and the degree of intimacy between the participants' (p. 52). In cross-cultural writing, style can become problematic when it comes to presenting diversity in the dialogue of certain characters who do not speak the cross-cultural story's contextual language (such as Persian) in a normal standard way. For instance, characters who might be highly sophisticated, or less educated, illiterate, or those who speak another dialect of the source language of the story – and/or speak it with another accent – cause extra hurdles in writing dialogue in a cross-cultural narrative. Junghare (1982) notes the same obstacle in Hindi language by explaining that:

In India one can determine a person's caste, class, and education from the language or dialect he speaks and from the way he speaks it ... It is difficult to make the less-educated sound less-educated, to make Brahmans sound like Brahmans, and to make a cowherd sound like a cowherd on the basis of language use. English simply does not possess equivalent linguistic variation. Many linguistic distinctions get lost ... (pp. 123–124)

The above-mentioned variables' emergence and impact on the narrative writing is noticeable when people from different parts of Iran – with their distinct ethnic and racial backgrounds – come in contact with one another in the storyline.

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<sup>48</sup> For more on this topic please refer to Aliakbari and Toni (2008), Archer and Minou-Archer (1972), Beeman (1976, 1986, 2001), Davis (2011), Izadi (2015), Németh (2008), Seghatolislami (2002), Sharifian (2008), and Yarmohammadi (1964).

As already mentioned, even though the majority of Iranians have Persian ethnicity and Persian is the national language of the country, ‘Iran is home to numerous ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic groups, such as the Kurds, Azeris and others’ (Jaspal, 2016, p. 424). Characters in *Yousef’s Sooreh* are homogeneous in that respect to a moderate extent, mainly because it is a more family-based type of story and most characters are middle class Persian-speaking Tehranis. As such, while other cross-cultural writers need to deal with certain hurdles in that area, I did not encounter any such barriers while composing this romance novel.

### **Profanity and prayers**

Verbal abuse is an inseparable part of any language. Profanity is a great part a culture-based component of linguistics in all languages (Aldebyan, 2008; Dewaele, 2004). Dewaele’s (2004) study on the emotional force of swearwords and taboo words shows that ‘swearing happens within clearly defined cultural contexts. Scripts for swearing differ between languages, not only in the metaphors used but also in what is deemed acceptable’ (p. 214). There are numerous inconsistencies and mismatches in the swear language between Persian and English, particularly when religion and cultural differences come to play. One major category includes the religious swear words in Persian, which undoubtedly cannot be precisely matched with those of the Western contexts, especially in secular societies. According to a study by the National Research Foundation of Korea on Iran, ‘[t]here are many lexemes which contain khoda [Persian for God] and allah even in the non-religious context’ (Sangin, 2014, p. 2). Similarly, most often, outbursts of such utterances are in the form of religious cursing, praying to God and wishing for something bad to happen to the addressee, such as, *May God make you paralysed!*, *May Abalfazl (or another holy figure) hit you in the waist!*, or *For the sake of Imam Hossein (or another holy figure) may you become miserable/crippled!*<sup>49</sup>

In regard to the prevalence of vulgar language brought into diasporic cross-cultural writing, a relative observation I made was when I compared the novels

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<sup>49</sup> More information on profanity and prayers can be found in Bamiro (2011), Junghare (1982), and Modarresi-Tehrani (1978).

examined in this research on the basis of their narrative contexts. Those entirely set in Iran had fewer swear words as opposed to those with dual East/West contextual backdrop. One main reason is the current politics of the Iranian publishing industry with its strict control over its inland/onshore fiction writers' autonomy, forcing the writers to keep their works decent and seemly, to pass the heavy censorship regime. In fact, vulgar language and obviously pornography are banned in all types and in all genres of literature in post-revolutionary Iran. Therefore, it is only natural not to find any derogatory language the way it is ordinarily widespread in Western culture. This has eventually turned into a habitual way of writing for Iranian writers, which is then carried over to the West by their migration.<sup>50</sup>

### **Emotions and affect in Persian language and Iranians**

Flawless presentation of human emotions and passions in literary works is one of any writer's main aspirations and objectives. From the perspective of diasporic literature, the vast majority of experts and commentators in the field (Aldebyan, 2008; Junghare, 1982; O'Shea, 2000; Sharifian, 2013; Wierzbicka, 1995) agree that in terms of quality as well as quantity, emotions are culture-based and hence are also language-dependent phenomena.

According to Atoofi, contrary to the Western culture – in which rationality is more significant and being emotional carries a not-so-positive connotation – in Persian overt affection is viewed as an added merit in personality traits, and does not contradict rationality (2011). Generally, most languages which represent Eastern cultures are known to be more emotionally loaded compared to English (Aldebyan, 2008; Goddard, 2002; Junghare, 1982; O'Shea, 2000; Sharifian, 2013). This often leaves English with certain linguistic incapability in accommodating and reflecting all the emotive and passion-related subtleties of these other languages within English texts.

Sharifian believes that people's feelings towards emotions and emotional utterances are innately enfolded within certain mental modules that are culture-

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<sup>50</sup> For more readings on this topic please see Aldebyan (2008), Altarriba and Santiago-Rivera (1994), Amati-Mehler, Argentieri, and Canestri (1993), Dewaele (2004), Javier (1989), Rintell (1984), and Sangin (2014).

based (2003). While instantiating the gravity of emotiveness in Persian language, he states that '[t]he Persian emotion schemas ... encourage a stronger linguistic expression of emotions when compared to those of many Western schemas' (2013, p. 105). Similarly, on the same topic, O'Shea (2000) argues that 'excessive dramatic statements are quite normal among Iranians' (p. 83). She adds that 'someone may insist that they love you more than their siblings' (p. 83). This is indeed quite true and visible considering how many more endearing expressions and statements exist in Persian, as well as in Arabic and Azeri languages, compared to English.

'When it comes to English, some Iranians complain that it does not provide adequate means for them to express their emotions' (Sharifian, 2013, p. 106). Sharifian relates this to the fact that 'Persian emotion schemas may not readily be rendered by the kinds of English expressions that are in current use' (2013, p. 106). Some of the most common ones are: 'My existence!' (as a phrase of address), 'My liver!' (as an idiomatic phrase of address), 'May I be your sacrifice', 'May I be slaughtered for you', 'May everything/something be sacrificed for your head', 'May I revolve around you', 'May God kill me', 'May God make me the one who dies before you', 'May God strike me, instead, on the head with your pains, sufferings, and hardships', 'May all your diseases come to my body', 'I am the dirt under your feet', etc. Most of these have turned into clichés due to exhaustive usage. Nevertheless, despite the unavailability of proper English equivalents, the existence of such expressions in the source culture and language needs to be acknowledged in the English text one way or another. Using any of these in an English text would create a very strange impression of that English text; therefore other ways need to be found to express these emotions in English, especially in a romance where these elements are paramount to the narrative. This can be achieved, for example, using figurative language such as metaphor which is how love and affection are expressed in English, and although there seems to be not that much range for expressing love in English, there is no difference between Persian emotion and Western emotion, also keeping in mind that the difference is to do with the overt expression of emotions in different cultures, not in the emotions themselves. Sharifian suggests glossing the Persian

terms of endearment into English as the best resolution despite its deficiencies (2013, p. 106).

Within the diasporic literature, there is abundant proof of this emotiveness and sentimentality in Iranians. As Alizadeh (2010) states in his non-fiction, ‘Iranians are too passionate. A nation of poets and patriots’ (p. 20). This statement connotes overabundance of passion and emotion in Iranians. This is not merely evident in Iranians’ communication, but also in their actions and reactions, which is why there are numerous traditional rituals for different private and social occasions for expressing such emotions and passions. Until a couple of decades ago, weddings – as the biggest, happiest, and most important ceremonies – used to last up to a week or even longer. They still do in some communities, and even though the duration of the ceremonies is now shorter, especially in the cities, they are still held with the manifestation of maximum degrees of exuberance, and merrymaking.

The same degree of emotion – yet in a negative way – is expressed in Iranian’s rituals of showing sorrow, or in cases of grief and mourning. Like most Middle Easterners, Iranians have an extreme way of showing grief and despair at times of distress, adversity, and trauma. In their way of mourning and lamenting as a response to emotional shocks, such as loss of a loved one, or injury to a close blood-relative, there is often much greater emotion and sentiment. This can reach the point of not acting rationally and even attempting self-injurious behaviours. Often there is a need for other relatives and friends to intervene and prevent people nearby from getting hurt in the process and further worsening the scenario. For this reason, Beeman (1986) mentions in his book Iranian people’s ‘common practice of breaking the news of a tragedy in stages’ (p. 30). Shahriar Mandanipour humorously describes Iranians’ way of accompanying an emergency patient to the hospital. In his *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, we read that ‘family members or friends ... in typical Middle Eastern fashion, often wail and scream louder than the injured or dying person’ (2009, p. 112). Likewise, in her memoir, *Iran Awakening*, Shirin Ebadi explains Iranian women’s mourning for Khomeini’s death in 1989 by stating that ‘[w]omen swathed in black chadors beat their chests rhythmically, wailing in lament the way Shia have

mourned their martyrs and their dead for centuries' (2006, p. 93). In *Rooftops of Tehran*, Mahbod Seraji portrays this customary attitude in a more graphic and elaborate way on the occasion of an arrest by the Shah's secret police. Pasha has a good view from the rooftop of his house to the alley and to Zari's front yard, where – as Pasha witnesses – Doctor takes refuge while being chased by a few SAVAK agents. Doctor is soon dragged out, beaten severely in front of neighbours, and taken to prison where he is further tortured as a political activist and later killed:

Zari runs after the car, and the neighbors run after her. Zari's mom faints on the sidewalk ...

...

Zari is crying hysterically as the neighbors try to restrain her.

...

... [S]uddenly I hear a loud cry from the end of the alley. Doctor's parents ... are rushing toward the rest of us. Doctor's mother beats herself in the head and scratches her face with her fingernails as she howls her anguish. His father limps toward us with a tormented look on his face. A number of women ... are trying to stop Doctor's mom from hurting herself. Her cries are agonizingly painful to hear.

...

Doctor's father sees his son's blood on the sidewalk and collapses at the spot with a cry that could break the devil's heart. He dips his left hand ... in the blood, brings it up to his face, and kisses it as he wails in despair. (2009, pp. 84–85)

Susanne Pari narrates the same emotion on the loss of a loved one, in her novel, *The Fortune Catcher*, when Maman Bozorg lies to everyone that Dariush is dead:

A certain measure of wailing and sobbing and chest-beating is beneficial ... I have known several widows who took to pounding their heads against a wall and some women who screamed like gypsies and others who wore black for the remainder of their lives ... Her [Mariam's] grief for the death of her cousin was endless and extreme.

She whined, she wept, she wailed. She scratched herself, tore her clothing, refused to bathe ... She conversed with herself in childish voices and would not look anyone in the eyes. (1997, p. 269)

This tendency in Iranians to not handle bad news calmly, especially in tragedies, is in some people due to stronger family relations and group ties. In others, it might only be a means to keep face (*aberu*) and to pretend that such relations and ties do exist and matter to them, simply because only those who care the most cry the most. There is also the fact that younger ones emulate their elders and children grow up acting the way their grownups always have, and hence solidifying and reinforcing this cultural behaviour. Regardless of however it is rooted, as Seraji put it, '[w]e Persians as a people are too deeply immersed in misery to resist despair when it knocks on our door' (2009, p. 13).

In cross-cultural writing, these strong reactions and outbursts would seem awkward or might lead to misinterpretations. To avoid this misconception, as noted in the examples, each writer has had their unique way of clarifying this tendency and notifying the unfamiliar reader about such aptness within the Iranian context. Likewise, as a romance novel based in Iran, *Yousef's Sooreh* is not an exception where emotion and emotiveness are concerned. The following are some examples where this extreme sentimentality becomes evident in dialogue:

- (1) Realising the depth and gravity of the matter, and in light of the fact that Iranians tend to go to extremes in showing sentiments and emotions, both Khanom Jaan and Shireen start wailing louder than before.  
Soo throws herself at her father's feet in tears. (p. 80)
- (2) '*Khoda margam bedeh*. God, take me now.' Khanom Jaan begins beating herself and goes on her knees in front of her son. 'Death is inevitable and comes to all, but I cannot witness my own child's death and funeral. *Khoda oon roozo nayareh*. May God never bring that day!' (p. 79)
- (3) Khanom Jaan is beating and scratching herself on the face, worried that the neighbours have heard Rasool. (p. 210)

- (4) In only fifteen minutes, Farah has already done more hugging and kissing of the bride-to-be [Soo] than any grandmother-in-law could do in a life time, even if all the brides in the world were just as irresistible. (p. 279)

Examples (1) and (2) follow the aftermath of some demeaning and disgraceful news the Rustins have received, in relation to false rumours and gossip about their chaste Soo. As devastating as this can be to a devout family, their reaction is still too overwhelming to look believable, but the cultural significance of *aberu* (keeping face) – readers have been familiarised before – as well as the extra information on this tendency in Iranians, neutralises the awkwardness of the scene. Example (3) shows the elder's severe reaction which is caused by her fear of the neighbours hearing the wrong allegations made against her modest granddaughter. But since this scene is right around one of the climaxes of the novel at a point where the readers are already aware of these tendencies as well as the cultural values, no extra information is added. Example (4) shows through the action of a character, Joe's grandmother, that the other end of the extreme (joy and happiness) too can be expressed in an overwhelming way within the Iranian context.

As discussed before, this sentimental tendency is not exclusive to behaviour. It is also manifested in the Persian speakers' discourse. Some examples from *Yousef's Sooreh* will shed light on this:

- (5) Soo is petrified. '*Ghorboonet beram, Baba!* May I be your sacrifice, Dad! You know that I'd die for you. The last thing I want is to see you and our family like this.' (p. 79)
- (6) '... You're the crown of our heads. May I be your sacrifice and not see the day in which you are not around,' Ebrahim continues with the well-known endearments as he kisses the elder's hands again to prove his humility, affection and respect. (p. 7)
- (7) '... You're the lady and the light of this house. I'm the dust under your feet. You're —'
- 'Please!' The elder interrupts the emotive endearments typical of a ladylike daughter-in-law in front of a matriarch. (p. 8)

Any Western reader can detect the oddity and unnaturalness of the above sentences, if they are presented in seclusion and out of context. However, the neighbouring context, the annotations, and the glossing make the reader understand the reason why these emotionally charged sentiments are brought into dialogue, which in turns gives a clearer understanding of the family relations in Muslim Persian culture, especially the codes of respect to the seniors and elders.

Interestingly, when it comes to people who are in a romantic relationship, the popular audience witnesses the exact opposite. Unless it is behind closed doors and in privacy, no such endearments are expected to be exchanged between married couples or lovers. In fact, it is considered rude, inconsiderate, and disrespectful to those present if any physical or verbal form of love or intimacy is revealed between couples. Once the cultural standards – especially collectivism, patriarchy, and respect to elderly individuals – come into play, they clash with these emotive factors of language. Thus, it is again the culture that has the upper hand and overpowers the language, supressing the emotiveness of Persian in the process. The following examples from *Yousef's Sooreh* will explain this, both in behaviour and in speech:

- (8) Shireen and Ebrahim, however, don't show much passion and affection, and avoid physical contact. 'Welcome home, *agha*, sir.' She takes his coat off but without any hugging, kissing, or even long eye contact since couples are not expected to show intimacy in front of others. (p. 6)
  
- (9) Ebrahim turns to his wife but only from a distance, and without much eye contact. 'I know you hardly ever pass any comments when my mother and I are present, but this is extremely important ...' (p. 278)
  
- (10) '... She is your wife now. By all means you can place it on her finger,' says Khanom Jaan.  
But it is the bride herself who gets a hold of the ring first and wears it ... too bashful to let the groom touch her hand in front of her elders and others. 'Thank you!' she says, without even looking at Joe ... (p. 280)
  
- (11) 'I can really use a big, overdue hug, for starters, but don't panic. Given we're in public it can wait.' (p. 284)

Example (8) clearly presents the code of conduct between married people. This takes place in Ebrahim's home in Chapter 1 when a sound rationalisation is required to why couples should act that way. However, in (9) which is a part of the last chapter of the novel (Chapter 14) and takes place outside, the reader is already familiar with these codes of conduct and knows that if it had not been important Ebrahim would have not asked his wife's opinion in front of the others, especially in the presence of his elderly mother. Examples (10) and (11) show that even at the climax of this love journey, and particularly due to the heroine's reservedness, the couple respect the cultural codes and refrain from physical contact in front of their seniors as well as in public.

To make this even more intricate, near the end of the novel there is also a reference to a short meeting between Ebrahim and the spiritual scholar (the imam) where the two men hug and kiss each other on the face in front of others:

- (12) 'Salaam, Haj agha! It's so good to see you again, sir,' he says, holding out his hand and bending his head in an attempt to kiss the imam's hand, showing his utmost courtesy and humbleness towards the reputable religious scholar.

But the imam dodges and grabs Ebrahim's shoulders instead. 'Va Alaikum Assalaam. And hello to you!' replies the imam excitedly. 'Oh, dear God! Is it really you, Mr Ebrahim Rustin, or am I dreaming? Long time, no see!'

They hug and kiss each other on the face. (pp. 224–225)

Aside from the high respect and gratitude that the two men have for each other, this action has been merely told as a report, since no other explanation or reasoning will be required by the foreign reader, other than this behaviour being a part of the Iranian culture. There have been enough indications of the nature of relationships throughout the novel for the reader to not assume any non-heterosexual tendencies in the characters.

## **Nonverbal language and paralinguistics: The non-dialogue aspects of communication in the narrative**

This section is an interdisciplinary area in between language and culture.

Nonverbal language or behaviour, in which interlocutors' body movements and signals convey messages, is an undeniable phenomenon through which people express themselves. Aldebyan (2008) asserts that:

With some people an angry look is enough to stop them from doing something. Others might understand a smile as an approval of what they say or do, and, thus, they continue with what they are doing. This embedded reference to body language is lost in the English translation of both examples. (p. 436)

He highlights the significance of mastery over the nonverbal signs of both languages as well as the proficiency to transfer them in a translation work; otherwise the reader will miss out on some valuable cultural information and might also be misled.<sup>51</sup>

This is particularly important in collective cultures such as in Iran where cultural barriers often restrict people in verbally expressing their true opinions, feelings, and needs. As discussed, rules of *ta'arof*, patriarchy, collective hierarchy, and respect to elders, among other socio-cultural rules, act as social barriers that hold people back from sending a straight communicative message across. Viewed from the perspective of cross-cultural writing, the problems arising from nonverbal language can at times be more significant than they seem unless proper strategies and choices are made by the authors.

Where nonverbal language directly relates to romance fiction is the position and status of women across Eastern contexts and the codes of interaction between unrelated members of the opposite sex. As discussed, silence, reticence, and reservedness are prime merits and are highly expected from the majority of women in Middle Eastern cultures; as such, much of the female population

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<sup>51</sup> For brevity, only the nonverbal signs evident in the cross-cultural resources used in this research are examined here. See other sources for the rest of the nonverbal signs, such as winking, Persian thumbs up, touching the tip of nose, the Persian V sign, knocking on wood, vocalic negation, and also using objects, attire, and colour as nonverbal signs.

resorts to other means of expressing themselves. Moreover, as a way of going around the strict rules of interaction between unrelated members of opposite sex (IUMOS), both men and women are more prone to resort to nonverbal language to bridge this communication gap between the genders. In fact, this restriction has made Iranians quite skilful in having their way without words. Beeman (1988) states that:

[E]xpressions of intimacy are possible even in formal settings through the use of bodily expressions and vocal dynamics ... Winks, nods, the half-lowering of the eyelids, whispering and prolonged physical contact, as in a long handshake, can signal emotional attraction, even if the words being spoken are formal. (pp. 24–25)

He further adds that the desire ‘in moving toward greater intimacy is often seen in non-verbal ways long before the verbal expressions emerge’ (1988, p. 25).

Considering the other cultural codes such as Persian collectivism and the hierarchal network, as Beeman also agrees, nonverbal language is again a more serious way of communication and still powerful enough to surpass verbal language. Beeman explains this: ‘Indeed, lax physical attitudes employed with the language which marks social hierarchical differences is a common way to register protest without being able to be openly accused of rudeness’ (1988, p. 25). Beeman (2001) also notes a few very common and deeply cultural Persian nonverbal behaviours such as ‘casting the eyes down, slumping the shoulders, and moving the body very slowly’ to convey ‘[a]bject humility or extreme devotion’, ‘rapid body action, and in extreme cases even violence’ to show ‘[a]nger and agitation’, or ‘try[ing] to touch or kiss the hand or even the feet of the person to whom respect or devotion is being shown’ to signify ‘sincerity of a petition or of gratitude for a favor’ (p. 53).

This latter behaviour is demonstrated in Susanne Pari’s *The Fortune Catcher* by the way Maman Bozorg falls to Dariush’s feet as her devious last resort to signify her genuine love and affection, and stop him from leaving her:

She goes limp in his hands and slides to the floor ... She clutches his shoe, and the skin on her hands turns almost translucent at the strength of her

grip. He wrenches his foot away and before she can look up, he is gone.  
(Pari, 1997, p. 376)

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, the heroine's humbleness, unassertiveness, loyalty, and respect towards her father, as well as her begging for his forgiveness, have been shown by the way Soo throws herself at his feet in tears on pages 81 and 264, and even kissing his shoes in public on page 264. Readers are also made familiar with the code of conduct toward people holding eminent positions and exalted ranks by the way Ebrahim attempts to kiss the imam's hand on pages 224–225.

In the Persian-speaking Iranian culture, eyes are known to be the most capable and revealing body parts among all the rest, when it comes to nonverbal language. As a matter of fact, people trust their judgement more on the basis of what the other party's eyes convey rather than his/her words or other nonverbal signs. Shahshahani (2008) asserts that among Iranians 'a considerable responsibility of communication befalls the eyes, as the culmination of non-verbal communication' (p. 74). She further elaborates on the importance of eyes in Persian interactions, especially societal rules in force for Iranian women:

Eyes portray sadness and the depth of sorrow can be judged through the eyes. Shame is also portrayed through the eyes. A bashful person as opposed to a shameless person can be distinguished by the way she looks away or looks down ... To 'steal the other's eyes' is to catch somebody looking at oneself. Thus, one should try to avoid looking into the other's eyes in order to avoid being betrayed or seeing the winking of the other, or hearing 'She was eating me with her eyes.' (2008, p. 74)

Her analysis shows the socio-political aspects of the ways eye movements and the act of looking can be judged by the public in the collectivist, patriarchal Iran.

As in the case of other cultural nuances, unfamiliar nonverbal communications need to be taught to the reader, along with those contradicting nonverbal acts that exist both in Persian and in English, yet connote dissimilar messages. Unfamiliar nonverbal acts explained below include: head shaking, hissing, bowing down, biting the connecting soft tissue between the thumb and index finger, biting the lower lip, and scratching the face.

### ***Headshaking***

The *Saffron Kitchen* (2006) by Yasmin Crowther provides an example of the Persian headshake:

He smiled when I asked what ‘girdle’ meant and shook his head, saying it would be improper to tell me. (p. 80)

Ordinarily, the Persian headshake is indicative of disappointment and disgust. However, as apparent from the contextual clues intentionally put in place by the writer, there is no such message implied in this headshake. The protagonist, Maryam, is unknowingly asking a question which under usual circumstances a teenage girl would not ask a member of the opposite sex due to the codes of IUMOS. That is why Ali’s headshake is an acknowledgement of her naughtiness in bringing up such a titillating and spicy topic as women’s underwear in front of him. Therefore, the headshake here is Iranians’ way of signalling awareness and admonishment in cases where one acknowledges the other’s naughtiness. This nonverbal behaviour can sometimes be accompanied by a raised index finger as well.

### ***Hissing***

Hushing or the ‘shhh’ sound in English as a request for silence is another nonverbal gesture which is made in Persian by actually making a hissing vocalic by a continuous sibilant ‘s’ sound while – similarly – placing the raised index finger in front of the lips and nose or close to them. The extra problem for the cross-cultural writer here is that the hissing sound as a nonverbal signal already exists in English for expressing disapproval, contempt, or getting someone’s attention. Obviously, in cases like this, when the same nonverbal behaviour means contrastive things in different languages, the writer can easily domesticise and familiarise the case by using the well-known English hushing, as Seraji has done in *Rooftops of Tehran* (2009):

- (1) “Hush,” she orders, “whining doesn’t count. If you want to be successful in life you must force yourself to be an extrovert,” she explains. (p. 9)

Persian-English bilinguals will agree that the ‘hush’ in the above example is domesticised (Westernised) and cannot be the vocalic used by a Persian character such as Pasha’s mother to quieten her son. However, if the writer is determined to familiarise the less culturally-aware reader with specifically Persian nuances, then there should be adequate provision of contextual information to make this distinction quite clear, otherwise foreignisation might cause misunderstanding of the dialogue and that in turn will negatively impact character development. The following are a couple of examples of how this is dealt with in *Yousef’s Sooreh*:

- (2) ‘*Hiss!*’ says the driver, bringing his index finger to his lips, making the hushing gesture. (p. 17)
- (3) Having been warned in advance, they turn their heads right and left every now and then to check their team leaders’ faces for any sign of disapproval, such as the hissing gesture or biting the lower lip, the nonverbal way of saying ‘shame on you, stop it!’ (p. 19)

These excerpts belong to early parts of the novel, namely Chapter 2, when the popular audience is in need of most help with the seemingly peculiar cultural elements. Consequently, enough information is embedded in relation to Persian ‘*hiss*’ to make sure it is not only understood but also not mistaken for the Western ‘hissing’ as a means of catching attention, or a sound used to convey disapproval or contempt.

### ***Bowing down***

This is a nonverbal act which does not exist in Western culture, except in rare cases, such as in the presence of a judge or a monarch, or in formal dance settings, and the theatre. In *Yousef’s Sooreh* this nonverbal behaviour is mentioned three times:

- (1) Only after entering the office does Ebrahim realise the presence of the engineer’s clients. ‘Oh, sorry.’ He greets the men with polite bowing. (p. 119)

- (2) Tahmineh steps out momentarily and briefs him [her husband] about the change of plans and returns to Soo. He then bows to them with much respect and humbleness before heading out. (p. 196)
- (3) ‘Thank you, sir,’ says the carer, bowing to Joe and then heading back to another area. (p. 255)

With this nonverbal behaviour, there are no further annotations and elaborations provided. The context itself is indicative of gratitude, courtesy, and politeness that go along with ‘bowing’ to show why and when it is used, and the purpose it serves.

***Biting the connecting soft tissue between the thumb and index finger***

This is another common nonverbal sign which can seem quite odd and disturbing to a Westerner. Often there is also an accompanying act of a pretended dry spitting on the same area after each biting. It is believed that this behaviour will ward off evil and repel Satan. It also signals repentance and shame while asking forgiveness from God after doing an inappropriate deed or sin, or after witnessing someone else’s wrongdoing. Shahriar Mandanipour and Mahbod Seraji have both mentioned this customary nonverbal behaviour in *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* and *Rooftops of Tehran*:

- (1) Dara’s mother, as is the habit of some Iranian women when they hear blasphemous words, bites the soft stretch of skin between her thumb and index finger and mimics spitting on it twice ... (Mandanipour, 2009, p. 202)
- (2) Sometimes ... I wonder what my relationship with Zari would be like if Doctor were not in our lives, and each time, I involuntarily and swiftly bite the skin between my thumb and index finger. (Seraji, 2009, p. 37)
- (3) The superstitious soldier threw his gun down and started to run toward the gate of the barracks, screaming, “It’s a *Jen*, it’s a *Jen*!” which means an evil spirit or devil. The other guards threw their guns down and began to run away, too, biting the space between their thumbs and index fingers. (Seraji, 2009, p. 119)

In all three cases, there is adequate contextual information within close proximity of the nonverbal behaviour to register the intended meaning of the signer. Both writers seem to agree that this nonverbal act takes place in Iran as an involuntary habit that belongs to the category of adaptor type gestures. In *Yousef's Sooreh*, there is an example of this specific nonverbal language in the reaction of Khanom Jaan to Soo's repelling her eligible suitors:

‘And people are going to spread a rumour that Ebrahim Rustin's daughter has either some hidden health condition or, God forbid, a secret boyfriend. *Astaghfer Allah.*’ She repeats this mantra while biting the skin between her thumb and index finger, a sign of repentance, asking God for forgiveness for the disgraceful phrase she is compelled to utter. (p. 11)

Since this nonverbal act is one of the most striking, enough contextual information is provided to convey what it stands for.

### ***Biting the lower lip***

This is another contrastive nonverbal behaviour. In English this act is normally associated with nervousness, anxiety, or dubiousness of the signer. In Persian, however, it is an alert which sends across a serious ‘stop’ or ‘no’ to the addressee. This is often used by parents as a nonverbal way of telling off a child to stop doing something inappropriate. There is a lucid example of this in *Yousef's Sooreh*:

Salman and Sara leave the room as told but not before Sara quickly checks out the contents of the bags. Shireen sneers at her with the famous sign of admonishing someone – biting the lower lip and a gentle scratch of the face with the fingernails. In fact, if it weren't for that nonverbal gesture and the reprimanding looks she receives for her greediness and lack of self-control, she would have taken out or at least tasted a few of the edibles. (pp. 6–7)

The above excerpt from Chapter 1 is the reader's first encounter with this nonverbal sign. As such, contrary to other future instances, maximum assistive strategies are employed in this case. The explanatory notes are fitted within the description where – unlike dialogue – there is always less restriction (usually caused by concerns over endangering dialogue authenticity), and more freedom,

especially in terms of space allocation to the purpose of teaching these diversities. The reader is directly told that it is a nonverbal gesture for chiding and scolding someone, to ascertain that this sign is not mistaken for the Western counterpart of the same gesture. Moreover, the neighbouring textual information is abundant and clear enough to eliminate any possible doubt or confusion.

### *Scratching the face*

This can be done with all ten or five fingernails, and serves two different functions in the Iranian context. In its severe case when the scratching actually takes place, it is the outburst of a self-injurious behaviour at the time of trauma and emotional shock, as previously discussed in the section on Persian's emotiveness and emotionalism. In its second sense, it is only a mild or pretended scratching of the face used as a nonverbal gesture to convey shame or dismay on hearing bad news or of an unpleasant event which has just happened or is about to happen. It is also a warning gesture to signal 'no', similar to biting the lower lip, and hence as an emphatic nonverbal sign the two are often used together.

In *Yousef's Sooreh*, these two nonverbal signs are mentioned on a number of occasions. A few are presented below:

- (1) Some women ran to attend to Shireen while biting their lower lips and scratching their faces – signs of disapproval and shaming ... (p. 3)
- (2) '[T]hat ... boy – may God's curse be on him – ... made us leave our forefathers' home and neighbourhood and end up here.' Khanom Jaan beats her own chest with one hand while lightly scratching her face with her other hand's fingernails, showing grief and agony. (pp. 9–10)
- (3) '*Ey vai!*' Tahmineh is already running away looking frightened, slapping herself on the face, followed by a light scratching of the same area on her cheek, showing immense regret ... (p. 48)
- (4) Of all the derogatory and disrespectful comments ... he has just thrown in the most degrading one ... Joe turns his red face to him with his darkest look ever, while his sisters and grandmother bite their lower lips and cover their faces. (p. 210)

Example (1) takes place in Soo's first engagement ceremony when, to everyone's utter surprise, the bride-to-be decides not to say 'I do'. Example (2) is the speech of Khanom Jaan, cursing Joe for changing their destiny with his wrongdoing as a young boy. Example (3) shows Tahmineh's outburst at Joe's aggressive way of sending her away. Example (4) represents the reaction of Joe's female family members to the way Rasool is destroying Soo's reputation (*aberu*) in front of the hosts, the guests, and the elders. In all four cases, there is sufficient contextual description and annotations to assist in comprehending these nonverbal acts from the characters. Except for a few minor instances of short suspense, in *Yousef's Sooreh* attempts have been made not to keep the readers in the dark. As the story progresses, their built-up knowledge, along with a bit of help from annotations or indirect speech, are enough to help them quickly pick up these cultural nuances, and find a rationale behind these areas of differences.

### **Other cultural behaviours**

Before ending this section, I need to name a few other cultural intricacies which cannot be precisely categorised in the abovementioned groups, yet in the journey that the accompanying novel has taken they have been presented on a few occasions.

One is the practicality of sitting and sleeping on the floor, provided it is carpeted or covered by rugs, and also taking shoes off before entering a domestic residential dwelling – unless notified and insisted on otherwise by the owner of the premises.<sup>52</sup> The former is most likely the logic behind the latter. This can easily be conveyed in the description, and by repetition the cultural norm will be comprehended. Another is that on such occasions where there is a man accompanying a woman (or women), it is the responsibility of the man to pay for the expenses. In the following example a surprised reaction from a character has done the job:

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<sup>52</sup> Some of these occasions can be found on pages 210, 228, 257, 4, 8, 86, 87, 88, 114, 129, 130, 164, 175, 202, and 262 of *Yousef's Sooreh*.

‘Still, I’m not going to touch those. Since when does a woman pay for anything in a man’s company anyway? Is there no limit to your eccentricity?’ (p. 251)

Joe has already given other reasons to Soo why he will not accept her offer to help him financially with her jewellery. However, as his last reason to convince her and put an end to the subject, he mentions the cultural convention, which he believes needs be in play. The specific sentence construction using ‘since when’ is a helpful technique for conveying this or other similar cultural nuances that come up in the narrative. Following is another example from *Yousef’s Sooreh*, where this strategy is used. On the basis of religion as well as cultural codes Iranians are encouraged and expected to visit the sick, and preferably with a gift, even if the sick person is not someone close. We read in a dialogue between Joe and Ebrahim:

‘You didn’t have to bring all these. I hardly qualify as a sick in bed ... ever,’ says Joe, sitting on the other end of the sofa, noticing the pastry boxes and the flowers Ebrahim has placed on the coffee table.

‘True, but any other person would be in sickbed. And since when do we visit the sick empty-handed, especially one who nearly lost his life to save ours? ...’ (p. 121)

### **The writer’s role**

As explained, writing characters’ reflexes and actions that relate to nonverbal language can become a real hurdle when such contradictions come up in the storyline. From my personal experience and point of view, with my characters being Iranians I have always felt the obligation to write them the way Iranians would naturally act; however, the fact that I am writing in English for a Western audience has compelled me to adhere to the norms of Western culture. In such fiction as *Yousef’s Sooreh*, the aforementioned contrastive nonverbal signals look awkward and inauthentic, unless they are made intelligible. As a rule of thumb, if the nonverbal act is universal – as are most facial expressions of Persian and English – there is no problem to be solved; it will be meaningful. If it is semi-universal with slight variation from the English nonverbal act, it can still be

employed in the English narrative with some extra clarification. If the same message can be conveyed with more than one nonverbal act in Persian, the writer can choose the one which is less contradictory and more similar to the English nonverbal sign. In terms of the contradicting nonverbal acts or those that do not exist in Western culture at all, the author can either leave them out completely and instead convey the same message in a different way (through dialogue or description), or s/he can bring them into the English text and explain what they mean, such as the way other cross-cultural writers have done at times in the examples previously shown, each applying their own technique. Nonetheless, there are also those problematic nonverbal acts (common in both cultures, yet with contradicting meaning) which need special handling to avoid misinterpretations.

Whenever foreignisation is intended, the author needs to gradually build up a certain atmosphere for the popular audience not only to familiarise them with these nonverbal signs and relate to their semantic messages but also enable them to accept and even expect such behaviours and actions from the characters from that point onward in the story. However, regardless of the type of nonverbal sign or the kind of method used by the writer in applying them in the English text, a certain degree of clarification is inevitably required when writing romance based in Iran. As discussed, due to the codes of patriarchy, IUMOS, and also the high-context nature of the Persian language where a considerable amount of culturally shared linguistic schema already exists in the background between the speakers and hence is not expressed through words, there might be a high degree of nonverbal language usage written into the narrative plot. All of these require extra explaining to avoid bewilderment. The way the writer deals with the nonverbal language depends on how the writer designs the narrative, but still considering the socio-cultural specificities of the Iranian context, high levels of nonverbal language seems to be most probable in a romance fiction set in Iran which engages so much with the intimate and relational interactions between families, cultural norms, and prospective partners. Therefore, as seen, cross-cultural writers as bilingual professionals use their techniques to create a filter where these obscure and non-absorbable nonverbal hurdles are broken down and overcome in order to pass through and be understood.

## Conclusion

In this research, I have investigated the challenges cross-cultural writers are bound to encounter and experience when writing a contemporary Iranian romance fiction in English for a global Anglo-Western readership. I have then presented strategies and techniques other cross-cultural writers have made use of when portraying a foreign context and characters through the medium of the English language. The strategies applied by these writers to provide and transfer essential cultural information and present these nuances to a non-Iranian readership have been identified and analysed in this thesis. Wherever possible and necessary, my own strategies and experiences as a cross-cultural writer have also been presented via the accompanying romance novel, which is the enactment of the research carried out for this exegesis. While some of these techniques are common among writers, and have been used frequently, others are less common and applied less often or rarely. Yet in general, the literature of diaspora/migrant fiction – this study included – shows a great range of individuality of taste evident among the writers, both in designing hybrid narratives and applying these strategies.

The writer's decision to nativise/familiarise or denativise/foreignise the language of the narrative tends to be the determining factor in governing the amount of challenge anticipated and required in dealing with cultural and linguistic hurdles and how plausible and rational the work will be. The mismatch in the cultural and linguistic specificities between Persian and English has been found not to be a disabling factor in the diasporic writing since the writer is at liberty to go around those boundaries and find ways of transferring the message. This study has further emphasised the usefulness of universalities across all cultures independent of languages, e.g., universalities in cultural and religious norms. This assures that cross-cultural writers have much hope in resorting to these commonalities in getting past the linguistic impediments when designing their English fiction based on a foreign context.

This study is by no means comprehensive in terms of holistically approaching and exploring all challenges faced by cross-cultural writers. There is certainly room for further research in the area of non-fiction and non-romance,

such as those hybrid works based on true stories, and delving into the issues those writers have encountered. These works would feature texts that are not based on the romance genre and would likely include many more issues of culture and linguistics diversities beyond the constraints of the focus on intimate relationships of the romance genre, which is the tenor of my study for this submission. In addition, similar studies need to be undertaken in the process of memoir writing or works that are composed in verse.

The current research has not deeply explored the challenges of the domestic, Iranian-based fiction writers, who use different techniques and strategies in composing their work because of the enforced censorship laws, and who consequently have to deal with certain other challenges, some of which are perhaps similar and many of them different to the ones mentioned and dealt with in this research. Mandanipour's novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story* (2009), is a comprehensive guide to how these writers resort to certain strategies such as metaphor, assimilation, symbolism, and stream of consciousness to pass the incapacitating censorship and obtain approval to publish their books inside the borders of Iran.

The conflicts in the accompanying novel are designed to be more inward and internal, aroused mostly by the characters' personalities, beliefs, and ideologies, rather than the outside forces. Moreover, this novel is meant to be an *all Iran, all Iranian* type romance. The context and the plot are set within the borders of Iran, and the characters are all Persian-speaking Iranians, and hence there are no multicultural elements in this novel. Having these in mind, in *Yousef's Sooreh* I have attempted to put forth and portray the patriarchal structure of Iran in the 1970s, but not always through the main antagonists. The heroine's father, Ebrahim, who appears as an antagonist, is not characterised as a true patriarch, and neither is the hero's father a misogynist. Although the readers of the novel do not get to see much of Joe's father, there is enough indication of his feminist ideologies, for example, his lack of interest in having a son (an heir) after two daughters. A similar romance novel with a more stereotypical patriarchal antagonist(s) will simulate male-chauvinistic Iran in a more vivid and precise way. This in turn can lead the characters into taking more confounding

desperate measures, such as eloping, disowning, suicide, migration, honour killing, and alike, hence pushing the narrative to other more nuanced edges and varying plotlines, and creating, for instance, a multicultural romance novel – none of which have been within the intended scope of the novel for this thesis. Yasmin Crowther's *The Saffron Kitchen* (2006) and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) are two such multicultural novels analysed in this thesis. The focus of this study was on a minority of Muslim believers living in Iran. Similar research with an emphasis on the other religious minorities in Iran, such as Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and so on, would provide valuable explorations into their particular challenges in writing cross-cultural romance fiction of this type.

The type of research carried out in this thesis is of great value in that it has brought translation studies into the field of literary and creative studies. In a way, this dissertation has had an essential contribution in that regard by providing a practice-based case for the issues of translation. This work on romance is also unique in bringing a scholarly approach to the writing of the cross-cultural romance novel aimed at a popular readership. As globalisation and diasporic movements are only increasing, studies in a range of genres are important since more of these works are likely to be produced, and both writers and readers will be engaging with other cultures in new ways through these texts. Discussing other cultural writers applying the methods of translation of cultural norms and translation within those cultural language areas are always of great assistance to cross-cultural writers. This study opens a pathway to other cross-cultural writers who are applying the methods of translation of cultural norms.

Since, the focus of this dissertation is on romance genre, focusing on other genres by other writers can be a great contribution in cross-cultural writing. Linguistic translators can become cultural translators and do research on other genres and variations in other cultural heritages (such as Japanese, Chinese, Arab, African) compared to English. Cultural differences and dealing with the nuances of these differences in creative writing from other cultures hold pivotal significance in literature for these variations affect communication, which is the means to building strong relations across cultures and nations worldwide. As

such, these cross-cultural texts are crucial and useful means of clarifying and deciphering cultural specificities for a global readership.

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**PART II**

**A PERSIAN LOVE STORY IN ENGLISH:  
CREATIVE WRITING COMPONENT**

**YOUSEF'S SOOREH**

سوره ی یوسف

A ROMANCE NOVEL

By

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The creative writing component of a PhD dissertation in

English – Creative Writing

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

March 2018

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## Chapter 1: Soo

It is the last days of fall 1979, two months before the Islamic Revolution. Although the monarchy still governs Iran and people have their pre-revolutionary values, standards, freedom, and way of life, Tehran has not been itself for the past few months. The city's nightlife, luminous after sunset – with thousands on the streets, shopping, eating out, or just having a night out with friends or family – is gradually changing into dark nights of gunshots and smoke, and in the following weeks, even military curfew. As for the days, the anti-Shah demonstrations and protests are increasing by the minute. Ordinary people in an extraordinary hope for a new democratic government have been appearing on the streets to show their unity and shared aspirations with other Iranians.

Behind closed doors, however, people have other battles to win, which have not much to do with political upheavals outside but instead with their historic culture, religion, and traditional values. Even there, individuals are often in a struggle with one another to gain democracy, though not of the similar nature. The same is true in a household like that of the Rustin family where – unlike most other ordinary households – patriarchy does not rule that much. Yet, there are certain power-related conflicts between the members, especially since the eldest daughter, Soo, has reached marital age – and is even way past it according to traditional views – but is still single. Ever since an incident that made the Rustins move out of their neighbourhood ten years ago, the family of five – or six – has resided with a respected name and honourable reputation in Shemiran, away from the city centre. The sixth member is the paternal grandmother, Khanom Jaan, an elderly matriarch who – since the death of her husband – spends her time in her children's homes, going from one to the other, dividing her time depending on which one of her children or grandchildren needs her guidance and expertise most.

Ever since Soo's birth, nearly nineteen years ago, one of Khanom Jaan's greatest aspirations has been to see her firstborn grandson, Rasool, marry Soo, consolidating and strengthening the familial ties within the Rustin dynasty. She has always thought – and still thinks – that Soo is too good a piece of work in

every way to be handed over to a family of strangers. Becoming the Rustin family's first bride is too good an opportunity to be wasted on a girl who is an outsider. No other girl but Soo deserves the prestige and glory that come with marrying a young man like Rasool Rustin. These two grandchildren, according to her strategic pairing and planning, are a match made in heaven. She would repeatedly narrate to everyone how she had begged God for a baby girl when her youngest, Ebrahim, and his wife, Shireen, had just been married.

She would then apologise for her selfishness and state that though this was not the kind of wish any Iranian mother would make for her newlywed son and daughter-in-law, it was done out of desperation. 'The boy was nearly ten and had no female cousins. Besides, Ebrahim was never the kind of man to favour a son over a daughter,' she would proudly announce with a satisfactory smile which brought out her four gold teeth, symmetrically designed, one on each side of her mouth, top and bottom, right and left.

However, throughout the years, as eager and enthusiastic as she and everyone else has been about tying this knot – and especially her eldest son Ali and his family – Soo has never shown much interest. 'We are blood related. He is like a big brother to me. We've grown up together like siblings, for God's sake. How can I possibly see him as a husband? And what about the risks of having a child with hereditary abnormalities?' she'd reason. Yet, Soo's rationale has only raised eyebrows of all her relatives who for years have had interfamilial marriages and so far no evidence of any handicapping conditions. Some thought she was pushing her luck, while others took her reluctance as the direct result of curses placed on her by evil eyes and spirits. 'Who knows? God forbid, maybe this is the price she has to pay for her beauty,' some would say.

Once Soo finished high school last summer and still hadn't said yes to anyone, the pressure reached its peak, as she no longer had what others thought was a clichéd excuse for putting off marriage. Yet to top it all off, she also wanted to continue her studies in Sports and Physical Education. As expected, she encountered a flood of objections not only to her plans to enter university but also the field of study she'd chosen. 'What kind of a girl in her right mind – and not to mention a religious one – would want to specialise in sports or teach it to others?' they'd say. And it wasn't only Soo; her parents were the subject of blame and

disapproval as well for raising a rebellious tomboy, instead of a more traditional, domestic girl. However, with political crises on the rise, universities were shut down two months into her first semester and that in itself was a blessing in disguise for a family determined to talk some sense into their unconventional daughter. And finally they succeeded in changing her mind.

Soo and Rasool's *aghd konoon*, marriage matrimony, which nearly took place at the beginning of last summer, was an unforgettable day in the Rustin dynasty's history and not just for obvious reasons. They planned for a preliminary religious matrimony, before the more ceremonial wedding in the presence of a bigger circle of their relatives and acquaintances. Everything would have gone as planned if only Soo hadn't fainted before saying *ba'le*, yes, to the marriage celebrant sheikh's third round of summon, asking her permission to marry her to Rasool.

'Sorry, but ... I can't. As hard as I tried I just can't go through with this. It just doesn't feel right. I am so terribly sorry. I never meant to hurt anyone but perhaps it's best that this stops before it starts, better now than later,' said Soo as soon as she opened her eyes and was given a sip of sugar water, and just before Shireen too collapsed beside her, hearing her daughter's shocking speech. There was much emotional mayhem among the two parties, the groom's side thinking they had been ridiculed and humiliated and Ebrahim and Khanom Jaan trying to calm everyone down, still hoping to go ahead with it if they just ignored what they saw happen. Some women ran to attend to Shireen while biting their lower lips and scratching their faces – signs of disapproval and shaming – while some started to gossip behind Soo, shooting hateful looks at her, or telling her outright she had gone insane.

'Don't do this to us, cousin. You don't mean this. A stranger will be a wrong patch on our family. An outsider is always an outsider who can never know you the way I do or make you happy the way I can,' said Rasool from the men's section.

But before he could finish his words, his furious mother, Ameneh, on the women's side, stuffed a pile of still unopened jewellery boxes inside her big leather bag and headed out the door, squirming and grunting. Khanom Jaan and

Rasool's elder sister followed, all trying to stop her from leaving, knocking over the mirror and the tall candlesticks at the corner of the *sofreye aghd*, the traditional wedding spread, set elegantly on the floor. 'I knew it. I knew we were making the biggest mistake of our lives waiting all these years for an ungrateful, weird girl who finally ruined all our plans and made a fool of us. To hell with her and all her beauty, chastity, and so-called nobility. May God's curse be on me if I ever ask that girl's hand again for my son! He would have had children his own height if he hadn't wasted his youth waiting for that spoiled brat.'

With Ameneh gone, everyone knew the marriage was off even if they could persuade Soo to reconsider, something she was determined not to do, and so the rest of her Uncle Ali's family followed Ameneh. It took a good few months for the dust to settle between the two Rustin families and for everyone to stop hating and shaming Soo. Some, including Ebrahim, gradually managed to understand Soo's reasoning, and to see this issue from a more open-minded perspective. Fortunately, the abundance of other marriage proposals made Ebrahim's family hopeful that, if not Rasool, at least there would soon be some other eligible bachelor who would be the one for their eccentric daughter. But then ... that was over five months ago.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today, in the Rustin household, Khanom Jaan is not in the best of moods. She is knitting a sweater with a mix of cream – and orange – coloured yarns, while leaning on a couple of cylinder-shaped brown satin pillows which are placed horizontally on top of one another on the rug-covered floor. Shireen walks in from the kitchen at the back with a tray of washed glasses and sits beside the boiling samovar next to the corner wall. The colour green in her v-neck blouse and knee-high skirt accentuate her small deep-set green eyes and blond-coloured straight short hair that hardly reaches her shoulders. The folds of her chubby waistline are visible and enough to push her over the medium-weight zone, yet for a woman in her mid-thirties with three consecutive pregnancies this is often considered the norm.

The family's youngest members, Sara, fifteen, and Salman, seventeen, with quite similar facial features to their mother's, run in. Sara seeks shelter behind her

mother, panting and giggling loudly, while Salman is furiously after her. Sara then hides herself under Khanom Jaan's thick quilt which is folded and placed next to her cylinder-shaped pillows. After much scolding from their mother and disapproving looks from their grandmother, the teenagers sit still and face their grown-ups.

'I'm sorry but I've told her a thousand times not to eavesdrop on my phone calls. And today she goes as far as laughing out loud right into the receiver,' explains Salman.

'Sorry but I couldn't help it,' says Sara. 'Of all the things I've heard, his big dream to one day join the JANG was just out of this world, especially considering his non-existent muscles and —'

'What do you mean? What *jang*? God forbid, are we at some kind of war I don't know about?' asks Khanom Jaan.

'No, Khanom Jaan. By *JANG* I didn't mean war,' explains Sara. 'It is a name or an acronym or something for a team of powerful gangsters, or warriors who run outrageous and courageous operations.'

'I think I've actually heard of these men, armed and masked, appearing out of nowhere,' says Khanom Jaan.

'Yes, they have been making headlines for a few years now,' says Shireen. 'Some people see them as heroes; to others they are outlaws. They've probably chosen the name JANG because they're experts in fighting.' She then turns to her teenagers. 'But whatever they might be, you two should be ashamed of yourselves acting like two-year-olds in front of an elderly guest.'

'Oh please, Mum,' says Sara. 'Khanom Jaan is hardly a guest. She practically lives with us. Don't you, my adorable grandma?' Sara pinches the old woman's cheek playfully as if addressing an infant.

'Enough sweet talking me, young lady.' Khanom Jaan confirms Shireen's comment and adds that it doesn't matter whether an elderly person or a guest is present. Decency, modesty, reservedness, and reticence, as well as womanly arts of homemaking, are undeniable requisites for a religious girl. People put girls under a microscope and scrutinise them carefully and only those who pass their

eligibility test attract suitors. 'These silly behaviours are totally unacceptable. You should use your time raising the quantity and quality of your merits and attributes. Give me your arm.' Khanom Jaan measures the knitted piece on Sara's arm.

Sara nods apologetically.

The old woman then faces Salman and reprimands him that he should know the feminine codes of conduct in this household by now, and especially the way their father feels about the girls. As long as he lives under his father's roof he should follow his father's orders. 'Now I hope this is the last time we see you chasing after your sisters just because you're a boy —'

The house door in the front yard slams closed, disturbing the old woman's train of thought. She tells the two youngsters to leave after their father arrives as she needs to discuss a private and crucial matter with him.

Shireen puts a glass of tea in front of the old woman and straightens herself in front of the oval-shaped mirror on the mantelpiece, bringing the v-neck low enough to reveal some cleavage. All except Ebrahim's mother stand up to welcome the man of the house as he enters with two paper bags full of groceries followed by Soo, the family's firstborn.

'*Salaam, Baba, khasteh nabashid,*' the children greet their father, bowing in respect.

'How was your day, Dad?' asks Salman.

'We hope it wasn't too tiring,' adds Sara.

Soo takes the bags from him while she and Sara give him a quick kiss on the cheek.

Shireen and Ebrahim, however, don't show much passion and affection, and avoid physical contact. 'Welcome home, *agha*, sir.' She takes his coat off but without any hugging, kissing, or even long eye contact since couples are not expected to show intimacy in front of others.

Salman and Sara leave the room as told but not before Sara quickly checks out the contents of the bags. Shireen sneers at her with the famous sign of admonishing someone – biting the lower lip and a gentle scratch of the face with

the fingernails. In fact, if it weren't for that nonverbal gesture and the reprimanding looks she receives for her greediness and lack of self-control, she would have taken out or at least tasted a few of the edibles. She is told a thousand times to wait until others do the *ta'arof* and offer something to her and even then she should avoid taking any unless it is offered to her more than once, especially in front of strangers; yet her lack of appropriate behaviour still boils her female elders' blood.

Soo heads towards the kitchen. 'I'll put these away, *Maman*,' says Soo to her mother.

Ebrahim walks to his mother and after the exchange of many warm greetings full of respect and courtesy, he kisses her hands and sits beside her.

'How was your day, son?' she asks while rubbing her aching legs.

'*Alhamdo lillah*, thanks to the Lord. As long as there is health, there is everything to be grateful for. Now tell me; how are your legs today, Mother?'

'The new pain medication you've got me is much better, but I've lived my life and a good, happy one too. Like they say, I am now *a sun at far west near dusk*.'

'Please don't say that, Mother. You're the crown of our heads. May I be your sacrifice and not see the day in which you are not around,' Ebrahim continues with the well-known endearments as he kisses the elder's hands again to prove his humility, affection and respect.

'Thank you for your respectfulness, son, but really the last thing I want is for you to worry about me. You have other more important issues to deal with in your family than my health. In fact there is something I wanted to talk to you about which has become of concern to me,' says Khanom Jaan, straightening her legs and rubbing them at the same time.

'What do you mean?'

'I know this is going to be about the proposal gathering today, Khanom Jaan, but maybe you should wait until he has had something to eat first. He doesn't take any news very well on an empty stomach.' Shireen puts a tray with tea and sugar cubes in front of them.

‘You’ve got a point, dear. We’ll talk after dinner,’ says Khanom Jaan.

But Ebrahim is too worried to wait; besides, as he explains, he has been invited to a reception in the mosque and won’t be home till much later.

Khanom Jaan looks at Shireen who is nervously rubbing her hands on her face and biting her lips. ‘Shireen, please don’t think of me as a mean old mother-in-law who wants to interfere with everything’. She puts her hand on Shireen’s lap.

‘No, please don’t say that. You’re the lady and the light of this house. I’m the dust under your feet. You’re —’

‘Please!’ The elder interrupts the emotive endearments typical of a ladylike daughter-in-law in front of a matriarch. ‘Can you look me in the eyes and tell me that Soo means any less to me than she does to you? Or that I don’t want what is best for all five of you?’

‘No, Khanom Jaan, I honestly can’t,’ says Shireen with tears sitting on her eyes, taking the old woman’s hands in hers.

‘One day when Salman has a family of his own and you feel the responsibility on your shoulders towards his wife and children, you will understand. Please let me have this talk with Ebrahim and go and tell Soo to join us in five minutes.’

Earlier that day while Ebrahim was at work, there had been a proposal; a family had come over – luckily only three women and not the suitor himself – asking for Soo’s hand, and Soo as always had shown no interest. She knew that her days of avoidance, which to her elders were hopefully just indecisiveness, were limited but by the looks of it, the countdown has just begun.

Once Soo and Shireen return to the living room in due course, the extreme seriousness of situation is visible on the faces of Ebrahim and Khanom Jaan. Soo adjusts the hem of her long pink home dress, covering any bare parts as she sits on the scarlet rug, facing the two heads of the household. As Khanom Jaan continues to rub her legs, Ebrahim starts the conversation. ‘I hear you’ve again rejected another eligible bachelor’s proposal, fifth in one week, no questions, no reason, no nothing, not even asking me for background checks.’

‘These young men don’t grow on trees, my darling. You think they are *as worthless as weeds you feed to bears*, as they say?’ Khanom Jaan adds while picking up her glass of tea.

Ebrahim goes on about the much expected preaching, the humiliation she has caused by ruining her engagement to Rasool, her incredible luck in having a great number of suitors, and his not being able to understand her reluctance.

‘I’m sorry, Dad, but —’

‘Let your father finish, Sooreh. Since when do girls speak up, let alone in front of the man of the house and elders?’ says Khanom Jaan, snapping at her and calling her by her full name. ‘Your refusing to get married is becoming quite a critical concern to us.’

‘Why don’t you first drink your tea and have some fruits, *agha*?’ says Shireen, in a pleading voice and with a broken smile, putting down a china bowl of fruits next to the tea tray.

‘Shireen dear, he has been sweet talked enough as it is. This girl is the apple of my eyes but let’s face it; you two have spoiled your children and especially the girls. I can understand Ebrahim’s unique philosophy in giving the girls all the love and affection they will later on be deprived of in our male-dominated society, once they leave his home. But that doesn’t mean a girl like Soo with all her exceptional merits should become an old maid.’

‘Now I wouldn’t say that —’

‘But this is exactly what is going to happen if she doesn’t listen to her seniors,’ Khanom Jaan interrupts Shireen. ‘I belong to a time when an elder’s and a father’s words meant something to youngsters, a time when their experience and knowledge were the guiding light of the family.’

‘It still is. And thank God our kids, though they are not perfect – and whose are? – will never go against our will and bring shame to us,’ says Shireen.

‘Not yet they haven’t. And no, it isn’t all your fault. I should have spent more time with you to show you the way when you needed me the most. And I would have if it hadn’t been for that ... boy – may God’s curse be on him – who made us leave our forefathers’ home and neighbourhood and end up here.’

Khanom Jaan beats her own chest with one hand while lightly scratching her face with her other hand's fingernails, showing grief and agony.

‘Mother, please don’t —’

‘Son, I know it is still an open wound which you don’t want to be reminded of. But it is true. With all of us grieving through that period, your siblings tried to help by insisting that I stay at their homes, and so ... this is the result of not having an experienced elder around when your children were younger and more obedient and flexible to discipline.’

Ebrahim doesn’t touch any of the edibles on the tray. He goes on reminding Soo of all the excuses she has made to delay her marriage. He also mentions his own patience and open-mindedness in not forcing her – like most fathers – to marry someone he thinks best suits her after she dumped his nephew. As always there is also the emphasis on how other girls would die to have Rasool. And lastly the generous amount of time she has already wasted in staying single so far.

Khanom Jaan doesn’t hesitate to cut in intermittently and add something along the same lines while confirming Ebrahim’s statements that it’s not just Soo but the whole family’s reputation that is at stake when this becomes the subject of people’s talk. Besides, with Soo still single, culturally they cannot accept any marriage proposals for their youngest, Sara, a girl who already lacks many of the outer and inner attributes Soo is blessed with.

Khanom Jaan then faces Shireen.

‘Please don’t get offended, dear. I’m not in any way insinuating that the children you’ve given my son are in any way flawed or inferior to this one, and we all adore Sara, but it’s common knowledge that Sara is nothing like Soo.’

‘How many more suitors?’ says Ebrahim. ‘How much more variety could a girl have? Your high school ended months ago and you even enrolled in the university you wanted. What in God’s name is wrong with you?’

‘That is exactly my point. A girl like you who – as they say – *can bring sight to a blind man*, and who also comes from a decent and respected family like ours, should not pass the age of eighteen in her father’s home. What would people say?’ says Khanom Jaan.

Ebrahim adds, 'Can't you see how this is affecting our whole family? An Iranian family's *aberu*, name, and honour revolve around the dignity of its females. In our culture what you are is not as important as what people think you are.'

Khanom Jaan's eyes are going right and left between the father and daughter. 'I leave it to your father to have the final word on this but if you keep this up we will have not one but two old maids at home. And people are going to spread a rumour that Ebrahim Rustin's daughter has either some hidden health condition or, God forbid, a secret boyfriend. *Astaghfer Allah!*' She repeats this mantra while biting the skin between her thumb and index finger, a sign of repentance, asking God for forgiveness for the disgraceful phrase she is compelled to utter.

Ebrahim's face is getting redder by the minute. Shireen keeps biting her lips and Soo constantly wipes the sweat off her forehead with her gaze on the floor, feeling the trickles of sweat going down her spine from under her long brown curls. All this was to be expected. The following ultimatum from Ebrahim was not. 'You only have one month to pick a husband, or else I'm going to contact your *Haj Amoo*, Uncle Ali, to set up one last engagement party for you and Rasool who is still crazy enough to want you after what you did to them.' Ebrahim leaves the house enraged.

## Chapter 2: Meeting Joe

Soo's friend Tahmineh, a brunette her own age, shows up at the Rustins' house around midday a few days later for the girls to head to the orphanage where they often volunteer. Like Soo, she too is a *chadori*, always covering herself with a black veil from head to toe when she is outside.

As soon as they leave, Soo wears her sunglasses, something that irritates her friend. 'It was raining all night and it's as gloomy as a dungeon today,' says Tahmineh. 'For Heaven's sake, if you want people off your back, I suggest you wear a dummy wedding ring.'

Soo lowers the sunglasses, but only temporarily, just so she can give her friend a look full of annoyance.

'Well, it's true. You're only wearing them to hide your damn face in public. Then at least use another suitor-repellent tool on days when no one in their right mind would wear sunglasses.'

Soo says she'd wear a ring if she didn't think it would be a wordless lie, and that she wishes people would just leave her alone. Noticing Soo's unexpected low mood, Tahmineh tries to console her. And while they tread through the damp alley leading to the orphanage four blocks away, Soo tells her about her father's recent ultimatum.

'But didn't you say that after your big boo-boo at the engagement gathering, your maternal uncle's family took you to their home to protect you until things settled? You said your dad came and apologised to you and took you back, promising that he would allow you to marry someone of your own choice.'

'Yes, but that was months ago and I've had a lot of marriage proposals since then. I guess my family never thought it would take me this long.'

'I'm sorry. Though I never —'

'*Ahay Khoshgeleh*, hey pretty one!' A male voice coming from behind interrupts the girls, who quickly clear the way. 'Raise your glasses and let the sun rise,' says a cyclist in his twenties, who passes them by swiftly on the footpath

after throwing a small folded piece of paper at Soo, a well-known method of giving phone numbers to girls.

‘Get lost, you jerk. You’re the last person any girl would want to call,’ Tahmineh yells at him as he takes off laughing and looking content with his catcalling.

‘God help us and protect us from villains and evil whims,’ says Soo, as her trembling hands bring her black *chador* closer to her face.

Tahmineh picks up a rock and throws it at him but it only hits the back of his bike. ‘Son of a —’

‘Never mind, let’s just go before someone sees you interacting with a *namahram*!’ says Soo, panting as she removes from her purse a *tasbeeh*, the Islamic rosary, a string of one hundred prayer beads used for counting mantra, and starts whispering them.

Not long after, Soo rings a doorbell to a house and talks to a girl her age who gives her a carrier full of books and a goodbye hug.

Tahmineh standing aside can’t believe her eyes and showers Soo with objections afterwards. ‘The whole community knows those people are not Muslim. They are not like us. I can’t believe you’re friends with Christians or Jews or whatever they happen to be.’

Soo points out that the girl is a wonderful friend. She just lent her some very valuable books she has been after for months, and couldn’t find anywhere. She and her family collected far more donations from their community for the victims of the recent flood than any of their mutual Muslim friends did. ‘And I don’t remember them asking what faith the survivors had when handing them all those brand new blankets, clothing, and hampers of food. You’re right they are different. They are *way* better a people than we are. And what do we do in return? We often talk behind their backs and call them aliens and outsiders.’

Tahmineh apologises for her irrational and unfair misjudgement.

‘I thought you were a great fan of Parvin E’tesami’s. Haven’t you come across her famous poem on this subject?’

‘And which one is that?’ asks Tahmineh with an impassive face.

‘The one with the father telling his child that being a Muslim means honesty, leaving others in peace, and serving humankind; then the child replying that with those standards and descriptions, there is only one Muslim in the city, and that happens to be a Christian.’

‘Really? I’d love to read it.’

‘If you ask me, religions are all the same, with only minor variations. If we just concentrate on the commonalities and put aside the differences, any religion is able to make a good human. There are even those who don’t have religious beliefs but they are good people.’

‘Fine, you made your point.’ Tahmineh switches the topic back to the ultimatum, the obvious cause of her friend’s agitation today. She starts by revealing that she knows Soo’s reasons for her lack of interest in any suitors. Soo is not happy with her discovery yet doesn’t deny it either as that would be a lie. But she asks Tahmineh to take an oath not to disclose her secrets to anyone.

‘However – and I don’t want to sound like your elders – they do have a point, Soo.’

Soo rolls her big brown eyes. ‘Here we go. First my family, now my friend. Didn’t you just say —’

‘Yes but come on, Soo. I mean look at us.’ She reminds her that they are Muslims and especially Soo, coming from a dynasty whose members are much more observant of the Islamic rules, spending half of their lives worshipping God and the other half doing charity. With all the restrictions and limitations Muslim girls have in conduct with men, chances of meeting the man of their dreams is next to nothing.

‘Fine, I’ll just ignore my soul and sell my body to one of my suitors.’

‘Other Muslim girls might have a chance, because many of us Muslims, me included, don’t believe in what our religion is prescribing to us. We want to have a bit of freedom, fun, and enjoyment in life. But when it comes to a conformist like you, who constantly feels that God’s eyes are watching her every move and every thought, the chances are absolutely nothing, Soo.’

‘Just because our definition of fun is different doesn’t mean I’m against —’

‘For God’s sake, I can’t remember a day in which you haven’t complained about committing some sort of *gonah* and having to repent for it. You spend hours every day doing various extra-curricular activities, hoping God will forgive you if you do good deeds for His people, and often stay up for hours at night to repent for your sins, all of which – if you ask me – are nothing but imaginary.’

‘Assuming I’d be able to reach that goal, what is wrong with making God and His people happy? That’s a dream for me.’

Tahmineh is convinced that Soo can never establish and maintain an intense passionate relationship with a man prior to marrying him when with every breath she takes she is afraid of committing a sin. She covers herself from head to toe in front of *namahrams*, nonblood-related people of the opposite gender. She doesn’t look at them or have physical contact with them. She doesn’t allow herself to be in the same room alone with them or smile at them or even freely chat with them except when a short talk is absolutely necessary.

Soo understands Tahmineh’s reasoning but cannot accept that the Omniscient Creator, who has thought of all desires in His people, would close every possible door on them when it comes to their need to be romantically in love. She is sure there are other ways of entering a man’s heart.

Tahmineh, however, disputes that on the basis of the specific way she believes that same Omniscient has created men. ‘They can’t recognise anything unless it’s tangible to their senses and yet you’re doing all that you can to be invisible, unavailable, and out of reach. The true love on the basis of abstract incorporeal stuff you’re looking for is only in fairy tales, my friend.’

‘You can’t generalise this. Our Prophet never loved any women the way he loved his first wife Khadijeh, an ordinary looking woman much older than himself; neither did he remarry as long as she was alive.’

‘That was the prophet of God. Since when have Muslims been a true representative of Prophet Mohammad’s deeds and way of life in any Islamic country?’

‘It isn’t just him. History is full of men falling madly in love with women of no apparent physical beauty. To name a few what about —’

‘In foreign Western history and literature, maybe,’ she says, pointing at the books Soo has just borrowed, ‘but not in a closed collective culture like ours, where not only women’s looks but also their deeds and behaviours should stay hidden from unrelated men.’ Tahmineh rolls her eyes. ‘Just pick someone like I did before you give a stroke to your elders, Soo.’

Soo is not convinced. Tahmineh doesn’t understand why her friend cares so much about pre-marital love, which is considered doomed anyway. She thinks that as long as a man treats her like a human being, doesn’t beat her up or cheat on her, puts a roof over her head, pays the bills, and brings bread to the *sofreh*, that’s all the love a woman needs and can expect, and that the rest belongs to romance books.

Soo confirms that she wants more or less the same things, but her problem with men is trust. That’s why she needs to make sure the man she chooses wants her for herself and not for what she appears in his eyes, but unfortunately the more suitors step into her house, the more she realises how shallow people are in choosing their lifelong partner. ‘No suitor has ever asked me or my family about my life perspective, my likes and dislikes, what I want to do in life, my goals, my dreams,’ complains Soo.

‘And most likely no one ever will. Don’t you know our culture? I’d say just put your trust in your father to do the background check and pick the best. I assure you even if it won’t be a fairy-tale life, it will be much better than what other girls have to put up with.’

‘By the looks of it I might have to do just that. How did *you* choose your fiancé?’ asks Soo.

‘For me, it wasn’t that difficult considering, as you probably know, I only had four suitors all my life,’ says Tahmineh, playfully.

The girls can’t keep a straight face; yet being in public they try to hide it.

Still laughing, Tahmineh describes her suitors. Her first one was her cousin Hameed, who has epileptic seizures; the second an ex-con recently released from prison; the third a man fifteen years her senior who had divorced his infertile first wife; and the fourth an apprentice chef – actually an apprentice assistant cook, she corrects herself – who is already going bald and soon becoming a hunchback at

the age of twenty-five, smells like rotten meat and has four dependent siblings and his widowed mother to support. But since, according to her father's opinion and background check, he was the only decent and appropriate one, and also because she was not exactly a fourteen-year-old any more, she had to pick him.

'But anyway,' continues Tahmineh, 'coming back to your situation, your first reason is not as unspeakable compared to your *second* reason, the reproduction dilemma, whether or not to have any children of —'

'Enough for today, Tamie,' says Soo.

They reach the Welfare orphanage, a large old four-storey building. They usually assist the staff in the infants' ward but today there is a change in routine. The team leaders in the teenage group are absent and so the girls are asked to help out with taking the teenagers on their field trip instead.

An old bus covered with mud, soot, and graffiti stops in front of the back entrance and the girls guide a group of forty teenagers, girls and boys, into the vehicle.

Once everyone is seated, the driver, even older than his bus, with hair all grey and a big round belly, turns back and faces the group to announce that their destination is a military base where inappropriate conduct will not be tolerated and unless they are on their best of behaviour, Welfare will not arrange another outing for them for a very long time.

'Why a military base of all places, sir?' says one of the boys, raising his hand for permission to talk. 'For God's sake, this doesn't mean orphan boys get to start the doomed mandatory service of *sarbazi* as early as their mid-teens; does it?'

The other kids start tittering.

'Exactly. Aren't we miserable enough as it is?' says another boy jokingly.

'*Hiss!*' says the driver, bringing his index finger to his lips, making the hushing gesture. 'And no glib talk either.' He taps the back of his seat, looking annoyed. 'We are short of budget for these sorts of field trips. Military is the only organisation that has offered to provide such services to us for free. Now sit back quietly.'

The traffic jam in the central district of Tehran – though the city doesn't exactly have what is commonly called a downtown – has always been unbearable, and now more than ever with increasing anti-Shah protests held on the main squares and intersections. The kids' faces are nonetheless glowing with joy. Since these outings only come along once in a blue moon, they seem to be savouring every single moment of being out, plus the sun is out again and the weather is unusually warm for a late fall day. Once they pass the western borders of the city, the traffic subsides and the bus starts to accelerate, blowing the curtains covered with dirty fingerprints, swear-word inscriptions, and dried booger into the face of its passengers, compelling them to finally shut the windows.

In about an hour, the bus enters a military base with massive iron gates and tall cement walls. After passing through a few checkpoints and security stations, the kids are led into an open area. It is a field surrounded by tall brick walls that are further extended by barbed-wire fences at the top. The ground is covered with no greenery, only dark asphalt, and many vehicles, mostly war machinery of different types.

Soon a military officer who introduces himself as the Chief greets the group in a cold formulaic way, making sure the guests understand that hosting people like them is not what they normally do. However, he explains that on the basis of a request from the Welfare Organisation the military sees its duty to assist these kids in acquiring certain skills before entering the outside world.

'Now about your instructor, who should be here any minute,' he says, looking at his watch, 'you need to remember that Officer Raad isn't a technician but actually a brilliant engineer and one of the best. It is in fact our privilege that he is doing his two-year military service here in this base. He is exceptional at what he does, so much so that our headquarters have granted him unlimited outside access which allows him – unlike other soldiers – to come and go as he wishes. In return he teaches a class on war machinery to other military personnel for a few hours on weekdays. That's what all the equipment and heavy vehicles on the other side are for.'

The group's impressed faces turn left.

But the Chief reassures the group that they'll only be working and practicing on the ordinary cars and motorcycles placed near them on their right. 'What I meant to imply is that, consider yourselves very lucky. However, as a word of advice, although he is very helpful, he can be short-tempered and cross sometimes.' The Chief wishes them good luck and heads back inside followed by two of his subordinate officers, who formally salute their superior and hold the door for him as he walks up a few steps and enters an office building.

Forty minutes later, there is still no sign of the engineer. The kids, sitting on the asphalt at a corner, have not much else to do but to squash mosquitoes on their skin, yawn, or engage in quiet chats while staring at the entrance. Having been warned in advance, they turn their heads right and left every now and then to check their team leaders' faces for any sign of disapproval, such as the hissing gesture or biting the lower lip, the nonverbal way of saying 'shame on you, stop it!'

'We've waited long enough'. Soo checks her watch and gets up facing the group while tugging at Tahmineh's sleeve. 'You guys stay put. Hopefully, I'll be teaching you a few things myself.' She drags Tahmineh along towards the office building while ignoring all her futile attempts to stop her.

'Are you out of your mind?'

'We need to take the group back soon. I happen to know a thing or two about fixing cars and here we have all that we need. It would be a pity to see these poor kids leave this place empty-handed. God knows when he'll show up, if he does at all.'

'But —'

'Just trust me, alright?'

'And as always you don't want to talk directly to men, so I am the —'

'You're the best,' says Soo, as she pulls Tahmineh up the steps.

The two officers – one in his late twenties, the other a bit older, both wearing dark blue uniforms – spring out of their seats at the unexpected appearance of the girls. The sudden decrease in lighting as the girls enter is striking. After nearly tripping over a tripod, Soo lowers her sunglasses, resting

them on her lips. She then pushes her friend forward. Tahmineh explains her tomboy friend's sudden plan to the younger officer, who is standing behind a desk next to the entrance with raised eyebrows.

'Oh, he'll show up, alright. Believe me, miss, the guy we know is more of a cause and reason for accidents than being in an accident himself.'

But the girls don't give up. While the officer goes into details on the strict regulations and the impossibility of what they are asking, especially the short-tempered Officer Raad's reaction, the older officer with a half-bald head who is next to the back entrance, approaches them, all the while taking his time to check Soo out with his piercing stare. Soo pushes her sunglasses back on.

'I'm sure the Chief wouldn't mind it. Now that this young lady knows how to, I see no reason why she shouldn't,' says the half-bald officer with his eyes still zoomed in on Soo. 'And please feel free to use anything you need in the field, ma'am.'

Having gotten the green light, the girls go back to the group, with Tahmineh cursing and pinching Soo nonstop.

The officers, however, continue their argument while watching the group from the tinted gunmetal glass windows. 'I'm not buying it, Ja'fari,' says the younger officer. 'You were drooling all over her. The only reason you let her —'

The front door to the office where Ja'fari's desk is placed opens and a tall, well-built young man in a soldier's uniform, with a crew cut – much longer than the normal mandatory clean-shaven hairstyle for a soldier – and a bleeding shoulder rushes in, interrupting the officers. 'I know I'm late, so save it.'

One look outside the window and he seems just as surprised to see the action in the field as the two men are, noticing the blood stain on the upper left side of his green uniform.

'Oh for goodness' sake, are you stabbed, Raad? How many more of these episodes —'

'And drunk too, again,' adds Aghili, 'on a weekday and as early as two pm?'

‘Shut up. I only had a couple of beers on my way here. Never mind me. What in God’s name is happening out there?’ he asks, pointing down at his work area outside.

With much effort the officers persuade him to have his injury treated before he runs out to put an end to what he calls a daring and ridiculous charade by the least expected person: a *chadori* woman covered by a veil. In the meantime, while a male nurse treats Raad’s wound, Soo’s training session is clearly visible and audible even if the officers aren’t actually watching the scene. They have partly opened the windows and although the guest group’s focus is on the vehicles and Soo, everything can be easily heard and seen from the upper level by the three men.

Back in the field, everyone’s raised eyebrows and open mouths are facing Soo as she starts the training. There is not much visible of her face, except the lower parts and the tip of her nose. In a matter of seconds, her slender fingers are all covered with black greasy motor oil, and as she adjusts her sunglasses she smudges it all over her face. Yet she seems comfortably okay with it. Her veil, however, is a struggle since it is in her way. One of the kids points at a work uniform made of blue denim with black stains, behind an oversized toolbox, and suggests that she puts it on.

Soo picks it up but is taken aback instantly. ‘Women’s perfume?’ she says, quietly sniffing. She also looks appalled to find a few empty brown liquor bottles underneath it. A couple of pieces of paper slip out of its pocket and onto the ground. The wind takes them away from Soo and lands them near a couple of students who don’t hesitate to read them out loud enthusiastically.

*No show again, handsome? Waiting for your call, Leeda*

*See you Thursday night. Don’t be late. Yours forever, Zohreh*

The students start chuckling. Soo collects the notes and shoves them back into the pocket nervously as if handling a rotten rat. She holds the overalls in front of herself and is taken aback by its huge size.

‘Miss!’ says one of the boys. ‘I’d say we forget about this whole session and run for our lives before the giant comes back.’

Once the pupils' giggling is quietened by the hissing gesture of the leaders, Soo steps right inside the overalls, fastens the clasps, and folds the hems. She notices a couple of boys talking, and lowers her sunglasses with a stare that makes them motionless. 'If you are discussing how stupid and ridiculous I look, just say it out loud. I don't mind it because you're absolutely right.'

But the boys apologise and explain that they had never thought a *chadori* woman could know much if anything about auto-mechanics but obviously she has proven them wrong.

Soo lifts the hood of one of the cars near her. 'Would someone?' she says, making a hand gesture that signals turning a key, and one of the older boys goes behind the wheel. 'Make sure it is in neutral first – you do know what neutral is – or you'll be running me over, before the engineer does.'

The group giggles again. The boy tries to start the first car which only makes some noises.

'You hear that?' says Soo, looking at the group. 'If you're lucky to hear the engine, like we are now, some of the quickest diagnoses can be made through the sounds a faulty engine makes as it tries to start.'

Upstairs in the office, Aghili exchanges a look of disbelief with Ja'fari and acknowledges how good the female trainer is at what she is doing. Ja'fari can't agree more and proudly brags about his own spot-on recognition of her abilities which made him consent. Aghili, however, doesn't buy it and is of the opinion that he only okayed it in order to watch a stunning hot chick in action. The two start a quarrel which further enrages Raad.

'That is insane,' objects Ja'fari. 'She isn't exactly dressed as a cabaret dancer, you know. What can be so hot about a *chadori* woman with only her face and hands visible?'

'Beats me! Perhaps she made your imagination go wild but whatever it was, it didn't stop you from devouring her with your eyes, so much so in fact that she put her sunglasses on nervously and kept elbowing the other girl to do the talking.'

'Watch it, man,' says Ja'fari, frowning.

‘Not that I blame you. She really is breathtaking, but since you’re married and she is obviously very religious, I never thought —’

‘Cut the crap,’ says Raad. ‘This whole thing is disgusting. She shouldn’t have been given permission in the first place and now to top it off you as two military officers on duty are watching her? She is sure to get what is coming to her from me. But you are stopping this sickening entertainment of yours right now.’ He looks even more impatient and tries to get up. ‘I’ve had enough.’

Aghili pushes Raad back to his seat and threatens him that any more attempts to run outside will force them to report not only this but also all his villainous activities outside the base, which will in turn extend his military service considerably, not to mention revoke his entitlement to spend time outside the base. ‘She seems to be managing everything surprisingly well. Why not use this extra time to have a haircut which is way overdue? Engineer or not, you’re still a soldier for crying out loud.’

‘Would you finish this already before I make all of you, including her, my next victims of the day?’ says Raad to the male nurse who is still busy dressing his wound.

On the field, Soo’s unbelievable car repair continues. Her way of dealing with engines and the strangest things she does – using basic simple accessories such as objects from clothing, bags, shoe heels, belts, etc., inside the car engine – has taken everyone by surprise. Having fixed the first car, Soo leads the way to the next, followed by the excited group. This time another faulty car is fixed by the help of some chewing gum Soo uses as an adhesive for a cracked engine part. Happy fists are again raised in the air as it too starts to work. For the next car, Soo is about to crawl under the engine for better inspection of the problem, but the agitated Tahmineh argues against it.

‘Have you lost your mind altogether?’ She turns Soo towards her. ‘Your parents would kill you if they were here or if they find out about this insanity. What if something falls on you or a hot liquid or something pours all over your damn face? Is this your last attempt to get rid of your suitors and avoid marriage altogether?’

‘I know what I’m doing. This isn’t my first and I’ve already checked everything,’ says Soo, lying on the ground, taking her sunglasses off, and crawling on her back under the car.

Raad runs out of the building, like he is a hungry lion released from its cage. ‘That’s it. The show is over. Stay away, everyone,’ he shouts, jumping down the whole set of steps all at once.

The students and Tahmineh immediately move away from the car and to the sides, looking frightened.

He stops near the sunglasses on the ground. ‘And you, missy! Whoever the hell you think you are, you are coming out this minute, putting an end into this circus and explaining to me how you dare do such ridiculous theatrical stuff in my absence, within my territory.’ He kicks the car door closed, making the car tremble above Soo’s head.

‘Leave her alone,’ yells Ja’fari, running down the steps followed by Aghili. The loud voices attract other military personnel in the near buildings, bringing them to their windows.

‘Go back, you two,’ yells Raad, looking red in the face. ‘I swear if you take one more step further, you’ll be sorry and so will she.’

The officers look terrified. ‘Call the guards this minute,’ says Ja’fari to Aghili, as they both run back inside.

‘I said get out. Or are you deaf too just as you are outrageous?’ Getting on his hands and knees, Raad bends his head under the car. But his face becomes transfixed the second his big blue eyes meet the mystery girl’s.

Soo looks just as transfixed and frozen. She turns her head to the other side, away from his petrifying stare, and starts breathing heavily. ‘No, this can’t be Joe. Please God, let it not be him,’ she whispers to herself. She doesn’t look back at him, and the unexpected silence and stillness become suspiciously lengthy to everyone. The students start murmuring quietly and shrugging their shoulders. But none of them dares to move.

‘I’ll take it from here. Just come out.’ Raad finally says something but in a deep and soft tone of voice. He picks her sunglasses off the ground and stands up

with the strangest look on his face. His previous fury seems to have subsided, replaced by total perplexity and bewilderment. Soo crawls out looking as though she has been hit by the same car she was under. No further looks or words are exchanged between them. He puts her sunglasses on the car roof and she quickly puts them back on, leaving his work uniform there for him instead.

The engineer takes over his class and Soo moves to a spot as far away from him as possible, and sits on a bundle of sandbags next to a wall. 'I might be wrong, after all. I might be panicking for no reason,' she whispers to herself.

'You look like you've seen a ghost or been struck by lightning,' says her concerned friend, sitting beside her.

Soo just shakes her head, seemingly unable to talk.

'You already knew he was going to be a giant and a nasty one too. So why do you look so frightened?'

Soo doesn't say much and only asks her to go join the group.

'From what I saw, not only was he not bad-looking – and I mean *at all* – he actually became tamed and civil after he saw you under the car. He was just full of hot air, I mean about the initial threats, etc. It's so not like the brave Soo I know to be trembling like this,' says Tahmineh, giving Soo a hug before going back.

Half an hour later, some disturbing chitchat between two boys, who were talking about Soo, catches Raad's attention, sending him into another rage instantly.

'Hey,' yells Raad, giving a jolt to the boys and everyone else. 'If you hate your life, go blame your horny parents who couldn't keep it in their pants, and were stupid enough to let unwanted bastards like you come into this worthless world, putting you and me and the whole Welfare in trouble.'

Everyone is shocked. Soo bends her head and covers her face with her hands.

Raad notices her reaction and continues, 'And no it isn't just you. To me every single birth is a mistake. I wish *I* hadn't been born either. And I wish I had been left to die when it was my time and I had the chance. Life sucks, and so do

people. But now that we are here and doomed to live, we have to make the most of it, because it's a jungle out there.'

The boys apologise. He separates them, assigning them to be his apprentices for the rest of the session, alternately. The training ends on time and in high spirits too, given the engineer's surprising sense of humour. Raad explains that he needs to take his father to a doctor's appointment and so he can't make up for their late start but acknowledges that at least it wasn't all a waste for them, thanks to their daring leader who surprised them all. The students and Tahmineh thank him and ask about the possibility of more sessions in the future, but he says he isn't sure.

Tahmineh also doesn't hesitate to happily introduce herself and briefly narrate their accidental volunteering for the teenagers on that day and what made them end up there instead of dealing with their routine work in the infants' ward.

With the class officially dismissed, Soo starts walking towards a covered area where the rest of the group has headed to collect their bags and belongings. She is, however, startled to see the engineer appear in front of her. 'Small world, isn't it, Miss Rustin?'

Soo's complexion turns to a hue of white instantly.

He continues, 'Now, about your due punishment – and that's not even taking into account what you did to me ten years ago but only what you did today – since you're not just any other girl, I'm willing to reduce it to only a date with me.'

Soo looks like she is about to faint. 'No, thank you. May God reward you for helping these kids!' She goes around him to leave.

He takes a sudden step to the side, blocking her way and nearly bumping into her, but Soo moves away quickly just in time to prevent any physical contact with him.

'That was not a request. I am not in the habit of asking girls out when they throw themselves at me round the clock, neither do I normally show any interest in veiled girls, so I wouldn't push my luck if I were you.'

'Do I look like I can or will do such a thing?' asks Soo taking another step back.

‘Even if you can’t, you *will* because – as you recall – the notorious Joe is unstoppable in getting what he —’

Soo’s speedy escape interrupts him, leaving him stunned.

She reaches the group, panting, short of breath and flushed. ‘Dear God, it *is* him and he knows who I am. I wish I were dead. What do I do now?’ she whispers to herself giving a quick frightened look behind her. He looks annoyed but doesn’t follow her. A slight smirk appears on his lips as he goes off to gather the scattered tools from the ground and move the motorcycles and cars to their original spots.

Tahmineh approaches Soo looking curious and loaded with dozens of questions about what she saw happen between Soo and the engineer. Yet the only thing she can get out of Soo is her eagerness to leave as fast as they can, and they do after Tahmineh waves a more-than-friendly goodbye to the engineer.

As Joe enters the office in deep thought, Ja’afari starts his insulting interrogation. ‘We honestly thought you had a heart attack there and couldn’t get up. We also saw your futile attempts to have a little private chat with her, hoping to add her to the list of your ... how many already, forty ... fifty girlfriends, and she ran away. How very presumptuous of you thinking a girl who gets rid of her many suitors and is obviously way out of your league would instantly fall for your toned muscles and blue —’

‘Shut the hell up!’ says Joe.

‘Just admit it, Raad. You’re no different to other men. You’re just sorry she was too religious to be available to a total philanderer like you. Let’s face it, when it comes to women, the one single idea that comes to our mind —’

‘That does it,’ yells Joe, coming out of the back area, with a half-buttoned shirt and his belt hanging down his trousers. He grabs Ja’afari by the collar, and lifts him a couple of feet to his own height. He then hits the man’s back to the wall, making a framed picture of the Shah in military uniform fall off the wall and smash on the floor.

‘Easy, man. Please control yourself,’ says Aghili, rushing to stop him.

‘Yeah, you might be right about me, but you’re nothing but a sick profligate pervert,’ says Joe, widening his eyes at him.

‘Put me down, damn it.’ Ja’fari threatens Joe that his behaviour won’t look good on his file, and that they are fully aware of the notorious Joe’s background, his numerous felonies and delinquency charges before becoming the famous Mr Engineer. Their report can easily extend his remaining one month of military service to another year. ‘And that is not good news for a crook like you who can’t wait to grow back his blond ponytail and go look for trouble on the streets again.’

Joe hits him again to the wall. ‘Cut the crap and don’t try to fool me. You hate having me here just as much as I hate being here. Say one more word about that girl and make my day,’ he says, holding him with one hand and pointing a fist at him with the other.

‘That’s enough, Raad. You made your point,’ says Aghili, touching Joe’s back from a few feet away.

Joe drops Ja’fari and heads to the door, grinding the broken glass under his soldier boots with his sturdy steps. He straightens himself up and fetches his backpack on his way out. ‘I let her go because I already know her.’

There is a backstory to Soo and Joe. They met twice before, ten years ago, in her old neighbourhood where he and his family had just moved in. No one knew their last name or much else about them except that despite his Muslim Persian background, he made everyone call him Joe. He’d rather be called by the anglicised short version of his first name, Yousef. His unorthodox, mischievous deeds in the community and the way he always took the law into his own hands at the age of barely thirteen had taken the community by storm and become an instant worry to all, especially Soo’s religious father. Yet, Soo’s encounters with him were nothing of that sort.

One day, when she was outside to buy some meat from their local butcher, she was chased by a wild street dog on her way back home. She hurt her ankle and took refuge under a car. Joe rescued her just as the dog was about to attack her, and due to her injury – and much to her dismay – he carried her home to her mother. Later, when Soo’s father found out about this supposed disgraceful encounter between the two, he sold his ancestral house and moved his family out

of their beloved neighbourhood to save them as well as their name and honour. Ever since that first incident, Joe became the unmentionable name in the Rustin's household, and luckily no one ever saw him or heard from him ever again ... until today.

However, Soo also had a second encounter with Joe ten years ago – which still remains a secret to her family. Joe was nearly beaten to death by a group of older boys, who were fed up with his atrocities in the neighbourhood. Soo witnessed the scene of violence in a dead-end alley on her way back from school, but street fights being so prevalent at the time, her attempts to get help from other people failed, especially since the incident involved the most hated figure in the neighbourhood, the outrageous Joe. As Joe ended up on the ground and the boys' brutal attacks intensified, the distraught yet courageous eight-year-old took matters into her own hands. She approached the boys while strategically pretending to be thankful of their helping the community, and announcing that the police she had seen not far from there might soon be joining them to better enforce the law on an outlaw; as such there was no need for them to tire themselves. The news about the police was enough to scare away the group – though temporarily – leaving behind the terribly injured teenager fighting for his life. While Soo insisted on helping Joe in any way possible, warning him that the police she was talking about were no longer there, Joe sent her away, saying he did not need or want her help, and that she should save herself by going home before his enemies returned. The much worried Soo complied but only to come back later on to check on him. She found him hiding inside a huge gunny sack used for rock salt and leftover dried bread on a salt-seller's oversized cart nearby without the seller knowing about it. Shortly afterwards, when the enraged boys returned to not only finish what they couldn't do before but also punish Soo for her intrusion and trickery, they found no sign of Joe. As for Soo, she took refuge with their old family friend, Mr Saltman, who returned to his cart, carrying two more gunny sacks full of dried bread he had collected from the neighbours. Soo then used artful methods in convincing the salt-seller in the presence of the boys to move his cart to other alleys, without mentioning why, and hence managed to move Joe out of the danger zone and into a hospital. However, she never forgot

Joe's last words to her ten years ago, that she was so going to pay for what she had done.

On their way back to the Welfare, all Tahmineh does is to talk admiringly about the incredible engineer and coax Soo into telling her what went on between them that jolted her like that. However, despite her consistent attempts, Soo doesn't give in to revealing all that she knows about Joe, only narrating to her the two incidents in a nutshell and the unfortunate fact that he has now recognised her again after ten years. Tahmineh assures her that her anguish is all pointless as there is no rational reason for him to want to interrupt their lives, even if he knew where they lived.

That night, Soo has a good reason not to be able to close her eyes. She is on her prayer rug doing a special midnight prayer, *namaaze shab*, begging for God's assistance.

'You are the one and only God, the only one who doesn't need others. You're the only one who wasn't born and won't bear any children. You're the one for whom there is no equal. God, please help me to stay away from sin. Please keep me away from satanic whims,' Soo whispers to herself while tears roll down her cheeks and end up at the folds of her *maghna'e*, headpiece, where it covers her chin.

She asks God to help her cope with this new adversity which has turned her life upside down, to keep this man, who was and still is her father's worst nightmare, away from them and let this end well without disturbing her family's safety and peace of mind.

'I spent ten whole years feeling guilty for being the reason my father sold the Rustin house and cut off his timeless roots with his forefathers' neighbourhood. Please don't let me feel any guiltier. I am and will always be happy with whatever You decide is best for me. I believe there is always a good reason, whether it is fate, destiny, luck or our own endeavours that makes certain things happen; so whatever it is about this shocking new incident, please let it not be ominous.'

Sara walks in after a near soundless knock, interrupting her sister, with a bowl of sweets in her hands and her mouth full. 'I know but this is the best time

for me to search for snacks without anyone watching me or finding out. You want some, *Abji*, Sis?’

Soo wipes her tears, smiling. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me. It’s after two am, Sara.’

‘I can say the same thing about you. This is no time for ordinary prayers. Knowing my sister, I bet you have a guilty conscience again about an abominable deed you think you shouldn’t have done, although if you ask me whatever it might be is not a sin at all.’

‘No, not this time.’

‘Seriously? So do you want to tell me what it is? You honestly look like you’ve seen a jinn.’

‘In a way I have, though not literally, which is why I can’t sleep tonight, but ...’

‘Well then, out with it, Sis,’ says Sara, as she excitedly drops herself onto Soo’s bed and gets on her elbows, holding the bowl in front of her. ‘We’ve got *gaz*, *halvardeh*, *sohan*, *baghlava*, *noghl* and other sweets, enough to last us till dawn.’

‘I wish I could. We can talk about anything but this,’ says Soo, putting down her *tasbeeh* next to her *mohr*, a solid prayer clay tablet, and taking her white prayer *chador* and *maghna’e* off her head. She unties her hair, letting the big round bun unroll behind her back and the edges of her curls come into contact with the prayer rug she is about to fold. ‘And please keep it down before you wake up ... you know who.’

‘God, no. The last thing we need is another lecture on what decent, modest, and self-effacing girls should and should not do by Khanom Jaan,’ replies Sara, as they cover their mouths and giggle quietly.

‘Exactly, which will then be followed by her one-and-only advice to me to get married.’

‘You poor thing!’ says Sara with a sympathetic look. ‘Sis! Since you said we could talk about anything, could you tell me what love is? And how does one know they’re in love?’ asks Sara with a serious look.

‘I don’t know simply because I’ve never been in love. But according to what I’ve heard and read, being in love is the greatest, most joyful heartache one never wants to be cured of,’ replies Soo in a hardly audible voice.

‘I’m fifteen and definitely not a child, Soo. Can you be a bit less theoretical? And I assure you no one can hear us.’

‘Well, to me, it’s like having that person in mind at all times, needing him more than anything else, and not wanting to be a second away from him. It’s the irresistible desire to run to him and embrace him, and be as close to him as possible. It’s the yearning to look at him, touch him, smell him, and be in his arms forever.’

‘How is the poor guy supposed to go to work or anywhere? Your way of love requires a billionaire, or a retiree, or an invalid, unable to leave the bed.’

The two sisters titter quietly.

‘Is there something *you* want to tell me about love, Sara?’

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A week later, Soo is the only one home and busy getting ready to go to the Welfare when the doorbell rings. ‘Please God, let it not be another suitor,’ she says, grabbing her black veil from the coat rack and putting it on hastily as she heads to the front yard. ‘*Keeye*, who is it?’

She hears a male voice. ‘If you’re not properly covered, do so because I’m coming in one way or another.’

She nearly jumps back away from the door and leans against the tall wall next it, panting heavily. ‘*Vai Khoda!* Oh my God! Please don’t!’ whispers Soo, short of breath.

Giving her one last warning to cover herself up, Joe appears at the top of the wall and jumps off it with a plastic bag in his hand, landing in the yard with a big thud which is intermingled with Soo’s frightful shriek. ‘Good thing your family members finally left together after one whole week or I’d have to keep coming here until I could find you alone.’

Soo is quivering all over while stepping away from him, 'Dear Lord! If anyone sees or hears you ... us ... if my father ... my God the neighbours have probably already seen you.' She fetches the gardening rake from the flower bed, and points it at him.

'No need to freak out and no one saw me outside,' he says, bringing his voice down. He raises the bag he has brought containing the students' accessories, all the stuff she used in her repair work a week ago. 'You forgot to take your ... equipment with you.' He tosses the bag at her feet. 'You also turned me down and I'm not used to that, not ever.'

'Why are you here?'

'Didn't I tell you ten years ago that you were going to pay for what you did to me?'

'So to top it all off, you're crazy too. I've no idea how you found our new address but you're leaving right now before I —'

'I have known your new address all along. The only reason I didn't come after you when your father changed homes was because I didn't want to cause any problems for you. But then, if I'd known what a remarkable work of art you'd one day grow into —'

'Shame on you!'

'I meant to say what an unconventional —'

'You have no right to be here, and I certainly don't need the stuff back.' She gives a kick to the plastic bag.

'What about this?' asks Joe with a mocking smirk, stretching some sticky chewing gum between his thumb and index finger. 'I could understand belts, shoe heels, pantyhose, and hair pins ... but *chewing gum*? Seriously? Is this your optimum solution to a cracked engine part? How long do you think this would stay put and keep its consistency once the temperatures rise in the engine? You can definitely use some tutoring sessions with me.'

Soo narrows her eyes at Joe even more. Her blushing face reveals not only shyness and modesty as always but also determination. 'I'll have to repent for talking to a *namahram*, but some things have to be said. For your information, Mr

Brilliant Engineer, my intention was only to teach those kids some emergency tips. In real life situations, people don't have access to hundreds of tools, equipment, and devices in a sophisticated luxury toolbox the size of a coffin – Pharaoh's coffin, I should say – like yours.'

Joe fights a smile.

Soo continues, 'Perfect engineers who are too busy getting themselves stabbed and drunk to be on time for their scheduled sessions shouldn't expect perfection from ordinary people.'

'Ordinary? Ha ha ha!' he laughs, tilting his head back, allowing a more unobstructed view of his prominent facial attributes: his thick brows, square manly jawline, and bright white teeth.

Soo shuts her eyes momentarily, and then looks away before this new perspective overpowers her religious self-restraint and endangers her moral standards.

He continues, 'There is ordinary, and then there is you.'

She starts a backward walk, frightened.

'Oh, and by those narrowed big eyes, are you trying to show anger and resentment, or you're just desperate to make your eyes look small or – better yet – invisible? Feel free to go and get your sunglasses if you like. Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere,' he continues in a playful way.

She comes to a stop when her back hits the wall behind her. 'Don't come closer. How very manly and heroic of Joe, the living legend! Of all the things I know you are capable of now, I never thought you'd one day become so voluptuously greedy to be making a move on a reserved and unavailable girl. Get out and don't ruin your character more than you already have,' she says, raising the rake.

'I only use force when there is an absolute need,' says Joe, as he sits on the bottom step of the stairway. 'With you I'm hoping it doesn't get to that. And once you get to know me better —'

‘Are you threatening me again? Can’t you see I’m not the dating type? Even if my religious beliefs didn’t hold me back, you’re the last person I’d ever go out with. My father would —’

‘That day ten years ago ... putting aside the *me-carrying-you* part which you were obviously against – and God knows how much beating I got from those tiny hands – did I do anything wrong to you or hurt you in any way?’

She shakes her head. ‘But what’s the point of bringing up that backstory, reviving the memory of my life’s most frightening incident?’

‘What did you think of me after that incident?’ he asks with a serious look. ‘And I’m not leaving until I hear an honest answer.’

‘I thought ... I thought you were a powerful and compassionate hero, a saviour who had been misjudged by others,’ says Soo with her eyes moving around aimlessly in any direction but his.

‘That was way more honest than I expected, even for a Rustin. Very well then, in that case, why do you think I am any different now? Why are you still scared of me?’

‘Because the Joe I knew back then was not a womaniser, nor an alcohol drinker,’ she says, fighting tears and lowering the rake.

There is a pause during which Joe reflects deeply with his gaze on the ground.

‘Still, I’m more scared of God and his wrath for the way we are sinning right now, and then my father if he finds out that you’ve shown up again in our lives,’ continues Soo. ‘Selling that house, which had been lived in for several generations, and moving out of that neighbourhood, have been really upsetting to my family. To my elders and relatives, you are the cause of an injury which will never heal. *Toro Khoda*, for the sake of God, forget about last week and let things be the way they were before. Stay away from me and never come back.’

‘You can’t keep people alive against their will and expect them to stay away from you. Things will not be the way they were before, and I won’t leave you alone until I get what I want. You owe me a date and I have a proposition to make.’

Soo looks disgusted.

‘No, it isn’t what you think,’ Joe clarifies.

‘I want absolutely nothing to do with you, no matter what you have in mind. And I owe you no apology for ten years ago. You’re alive because you wanted to be. You were the one who saved you; I only had a small part in that. If you have any problems with being alive, I’m sure there are countless people out there who’d be more than happy to put an end to it.’

Joe contemplates her point of view. ‘You also owe me an explanation. You see, anomalies arouse my curiosity and that happens to be my worst enemy. It keeps me up all night, and night after night until I find some rationale behind the inexplicable phenomenon, most recent of which has been you.’

‘I don’t know, neither do I want to know, what you mean.’

‘I thought a girl like you from a family like yours would be married off by now to a no-good, rich guy, one of those who are always after ... let’s just say certain type of brides. Seeing you still single in that military base was flabbergasting.’

‘I don’t disclose my personal life to others, let alone strangers.’

‘A few possibilities come to mind. Either you have a terminal illness —’

The sound of a key turning in the keyhole startles them both. Soo drops the rake and quietens what would have been a semi-loud shriek by covering her mouth. She then runs to the door and makes a head gesture to Joe in a state of panic. Joe rushes down the basement steps quietly and is out of sight by the time she moves out of her brother’s way to let him enter the yard.

‘*Salaam Abji*, hello Sis,’ says Salman, looking surprised. ‘It seems I’ve caught you just in time. I’m glad you’re still home.’ He comes in carrying a pot of *shole zard*, saffron rice porridge, and with just as large yellow-coloured stains of the same sweet stuff visible all over his clothes and shoes.’

Soo does a quick search of the alley in a nervous way, bumping her cheek against the door frame. ‘Did dad give you a ride back?’

‘Do you seriously think he’d let me in his car looking like this? Besides, he didn’t want to leave this early. I had to take a cab.’

‘Thank God,’ whispers Soo, as she shuts the yard door.

‘You don’t look yourself. Are you alright? Don’t tell me other suitors have shown up in the short time we left you alone.’ He puts the pot down and quickly checks the drawing room through its windows.

She shakes her head, taking deep breaths. ‘My God. Did you go swimming in the pot of *shole zard*?’ asks Soo with a fake smile, changing the subject.

‘Long story. By the way, the host was quite aware of your absence and didn’t buy the volunteer work at the orphanage story. She said to tell you they’ve got a bride for their son and one for their nephew as well, so there is no need for you to be avoiding them anymore.’

‘Good to know,’ she says with sarcasm.

He narrates how he slipped while helping out distributing the *nazri*, a votive food, at the charity event their father took him and the rest of the family a while ago. Yet despite Soo’s many attempts to send him out of Joe’s way, he refuses to go inside and insists on getting changed right there in the yard at the *hoz* – a small shallow pool with an ornamental fountain at its centre and a tap nearby, which served as the washing centre of every house at the time. He says he’d rather catch pneumonia than be scolded by his mother and grandmother for staining the floors and furniture. Soo takes Joe’s plastic bag out of Salman’s sight, along with the pot of *shole zard*, as she goes inside and returns in a hurry with some towels and clean clothes for her brother.

‘I need to go back and help out.’ He looks at his watch before taking it off his wrist. ‘But before I do I was actually looking for a chance to speak to you alone.’

Soo’s nervous eyes travel right and left, from her brother to the basement. ‘Not now, Salman. This is not the best of times to —’

‘Just stay here, Sis. It’s rather urgent.’ He holds her shoulders and turns her around before undressing himself and opening the tap. His talk is about his best friend Reza, who is not a stranger to the family, and his surprising interest in their

younger sister Sara. Soo is overjoyed and can't think of a better husband for Sara. Salman can't agree more but brings it to her attention that with Soo still single, it would be a total disgrace if Sara got married first. Their elders would never breach the traditional norms and allow this marriage to take place, and this will lead to Sara's only chance of ever finding a decent husband being vanished into thin air.

'Dad and Khanom Jaan would rather die than allow it. Had you been a blind, bald, dumb, and crippled old maid at home, maybe, but not when the entire male population who knows your existence is dying to have you.'

'We're not having this conversation right now,' says Soo.

'I'm sorry if this hurts your feelings, but are you a stranger to our closed collective society and culture? I don't mean to add fuel to fire. I know you're grilled every day and day after day for your inexplicable lack of interest in marriage, but —'

'I *said* we'll talk later,' says Soo, heading towards the terrace steps.

'You walk inside, and I'm going straight to Dad, which is what I would have done if I hadn't been considerate of you and all the pressure you're already under. Is that what you want? Making things worse for yourself and giving our father and grandmother a heart attack, not to mention ruining our little sister's future?'

He explains the futility of wasting another three weeks till the final day of the ultimatum when they all know she won't choose anyone. He asks her to do the right thing at the right time and just say yes to their cousin Rasool. Not only does Rasool tick all their elders' boxes, her timely marriage to him will further allow Sara to seize this once in a lifetime opportunity. They have a religious and cultural duty to assist a younger sibling, particularly a sister who, unlike Soo, lacks many eye-catching attributes to attract suitors. They both know that Salman only has both his sisters' best interests at heart, yet Soo is aggrieved.

'My God, how can you overlook all the inner merits in Sara and only focus on her appearance which, if you ask me, is near perfect by the way? Thousands of women with ordinary looks get married every day. I can't believe I'm hearing this from my very own brother? You've become just as superficial as —'

‘I’m so sorry, Sis, but you don’t know men the way —’

‘Even if it is her only chance, God will help us and we will deal with it. What is the big rush anyway? Reza is only what ... seventeen and Sara is fifteen.’

‘Reza’s older brother Raheem, as you know, is a political prisoner in the hands of SAVAK, the Shah’s secret intelligence police, and will probably die in jail if he is not killed already. Their father, Mr Kabiri, is nearly eighty and quite sick. He wants to see his one remaining son’s wedding while he is still alive. Do I need to explain to you what a momentous occasion a son’s wedding is for a father?’

Apparently, as Salman explains, Reza – being considerate of Soo’s circumstances and also being too shy to tell either one of the families about his interest in Sara – was going to wait, at least until Soo got married first. But his elders were determined to arrange a rushed marriage for him to a distant relative, and had even gone as far as buying a ring for her, so he was left with no option but to speak up about his feelings for Sara.

‘If it is meant to be it will work out. Instead of pressuring me and making me feel guilty, put your trust in the Almighty.’

‘That’s not good enough.’ He turns her around to face him while buttoning his shirt. Never exactly thrilled to have a taller sibling, especially a female, he goes up one more step to be at the same eye level as she is. ‘I need a quick answer from you and within the next week, because Reza is awaiting an answer from me, not from the Almighty.’ He raises his head and hands towards the sky. ‘*Astaghfer Allah!* Forgive me God.’

‘Please bring your voice down. I don’t know what the future holds. But whatever I do, I will *not* have my younger brother tell me who to marry or when —’

The sound of the ringing phone from the living room interrupts the siblings, and Soo storms inside to answer it. It is for Salman, so he finally enters the house for a short time, yet long enough for Joe to find his way out unnoticed, only giving one last look to the frightened Soo at the window, and tossing a note inside the flower bed. Soo picks it up while Salman is still on the phone. It reads:

*If you don't want me to show up here again, call me. And keep this safe. I don't give out my number to girls. 564303*

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The following day Soo shows up at a police station a few suburbs away from home to see about her chances of stopping Joe if he continues to harass or stalk her again. She enters rubbing her red eyes and hardly able to breathe. She has just been affected by tear-gas used to disperse the crowd by the anti-riot guards. The station is in mayhem, hosting not only clients but also over a hundred ordinary pedestrians in fear of their lives who are forced to take refuge in the station until the violent rally diminishes.

Her attending officer is not too thrilled at first to be dealing with what he thinks is a personal issue, a female's attempt at taking preventive measures to safeguard herself at such a time of public chaos. He is even less cooperative when she refuses to complete the forms to make a formal written complaint, saying due to confidentiality reasons she can't disclose her contact details to the police lest her family is contacted. Yet, he looks extremely concerned and sympathetic about Soo's fear when he finds out who the offender is.

'Miss! We do understand your personal family concerns in keeping this offence confidential but remember that the guy you're after is ... never mind,' he sighs while blowing into the air. 'Anyway, it's your choice, but unfortunately you cannot ask for police protection against any possible future incidents like this without pressing charges against him.' He then lowers his voice and comes closer to Soo. 'And if you ask me – and you didn't hear it from me – considering the wrongdoer involved, you're going to need all the protection you can get and the sooner the better, because this guy never gives up. Let's just say I was transferred here from a station not far from his residential area.'

Still, Soo decides to leave without completing the form or disclosing Joe's phone number to the police.

### Chapter 3: Heating

‘Well, looks like the bride-to-be finally made it,’ says Ms Partovi, the first carer to notice Tahmineh at the entrance to the infants’ ward three days later.

‘And certainly looking like a bride all dressed up and fancy. Are you invited to a wedding or is it your own one already?’ asks another carer, Sorayya, jokingly.

A very excited Tahmineh has just arrived much later than her usual time and looking nothing like her ordinary self. Soo and a few other women wearing white long aprons – Soo’s worn on top of her black chador – have their hands full with caring for babies all under the age of one, most of whom seem sick and agitated, some crying at the top of their lungs.

Tahmineh’s face is heavily made up and her coloured blond bangs are hanging out of her black veil with no visible intentions from her to hide them. She explains that she is not there to help out today, which is understandable as everyone knows she must be getting busier these days, only a few weeks to her wedding. However, her joyfulness, as she reveals to Soo, is due to another auto-mechanic’s session which has luckily been set up for the teenagers and so she is about to accompany the group to the military base again.

Soo, who has just placed one of the two infants she is carrying in Tahmineh’s arms, is taken by surprise, telling her that the teenagers have their own carers and leaders. Besides, with most of the babies sick with this epidemic they can definitely use an extra pair of hands in their own ward.

Tahmineh does a little dance, spinning the baby a few times in her arms, and explains in a quiet voice her brilliant plan in bribing Ms Taghipour, one of the teenagers’ usual carers to call in sick, which has in turn enabled her to convince the admin to let her be the teenagers’ leader one more time.

‘You what!?’ Soo grabs her friend’s arm. ‘And stop twirling that poor kid or you’ll make her throw up. You know she is one of the most difficult to feed.’ She puts down both babies in a crib nearby. ‘I see. So that’s what this is all about.’ She gives Tahmineh a quick head-to-toe look. ‘You spent all morning getting

yourself ready to see ...' Soo doesn't continue her sentence and gets busy folding the infants' laundry piled up in a white basket nearby. 'Never mind. Your personal life is your own business.'

Tahmineh gives a look full of embarrassment and pulls Soo to a quieter corner. 'Don't blame me and don't you dare judge me. He is irresistibly hot, not to mention extra smart, skilful, and all the rest. So what if I —'

'Who am I to judge people? But still, you're engaged. Your wedding is in less than a month. Besides —'

'Oh please, Soo. It's not like I'm, God forbid, married. Most likely nothing will happen between Joe and me, and even if it does, what is the big deal? My fiancé and I are not exactly crazy about one another. He can easily move on and find someone else. Since when have our men ever had problems replacing their wife, adding to their wives, or divorcing and dumping them, let alone their fiancées to whom they have no official commitments?'

'That's not what I meant to —'

'Believe me, girl, men don't need our sympathy. They get all the support and advocacy they can get from our culture, society, and even religion.'

'Would you let me finish? If you don't care about the man you've promised to marry, that's your business, but as your friend I strongly suggest that you keep away from Joe Raad. And no, I can't get into details about him. Just don't tell me I didn't warn you.'

'Your holding back like this about him is quite annoying, Soo, but fine, I stand warned.' Tahmineh leaves with her high heels clacking all the way under her black veil.

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Unlike the first session, Joe is already there busy with a motorcycle of some kind, twice the size of an ordinary one, when the group arrives. Throughout the session, Tahmineh's eyes are constantly on Joe, except for when the group's other leader, Ms Tajdar, looks her way or when she checks her watch and then her reflection in the glass windows. Although most of the students are under the weather, their

comments on the session and on Joe's expertise and playfulness are indicative of their contentment with this trip. However, many of their questions are about his strange-looking bike and what he can do with it. Joe is hesitant but agrees to show them one of its features. He mounts his bike and starts the engine, asking them to keep clear. Within just a few quick seconds, he rides it onto the roof of one of the military tanks and then back to where he started, next to the group, whose astounded faces are either on him or on his strange creation. The show, followed by a round of applause, concludes their session, and the kids get ready to leave.

‘And the two of you,’ says Joe, pointing at the female leaders, ‘if I ever see you bring a bunch of sick kids here, you’ll see a side to me you wish you hadn’t. You don’t need to be a doctor to realise they should be in bed right now.’

Ms Tajdar beats Tahmineh in apologising to Joe but that is not all that annoys the veiled girl. She points out that this outing had actually been cancelled till further notice because of the heating problem which has made not only this group but most of their kids unwell. ‘But then some of us,’ she says with a look at Tahmineh, ‘used the children’s enthusiasm in coming here to convince the admin otherwise.’

Joe sneers at Tahmineh.

Tahmineh approaches him while loosening the hold of her cover which in turn reveals more of her blond hair and bright red dress underneath. She explains that it wasn’t all because of her but since the heating problem didn’t seem to be resolving anytime soon and there was no way of telling when the kids would be all well again, if at all, she saw no point delaying this.

‘What exactly is wrong with the heating system?’ asks Joe with a frown, as his eyes move around checking every single student.

As Tahmineh starts to reply to Joe, Ms Tajdar cuts in while helping the kids get ready to leave. She says they have been given different diagnoses about the heating by different technicians but nothing has been done for the past ten days as their quotes have been way out of the Welfare’s budget.

‘Ten days of no heat?’ asks Joe.

‘Yes. You think anyone cares about who’s going to get hurt in the process? A good heart is such a hard jewel to find these days,’ says Ms Tajdar.

Tahmineh adds that even if Welfare could afford it, with all the bureaucracy involved in having any budget approved, it will take ages until the heat is back on, especially with the government currently busy with rising political turbulences.

‘So how are you managing to keep the place warm?’ asks Joe.

They have been doing all that they can, using donated oil heaters, blankets, more clothing, covering the window sills with heavy thick drapes, etc. But it has been very hard especially keeping the crawling babies away from Valour heaters or making them wear more clothes.

Ms Tajdar continues, ‘One of our volunteers knows how to fiddle with the engine and after a lot of tedious work in the engine room, she usually brings it back on, but in an hour or so it goes off again.’

A concerned look suddenly appears on Joe’s face. ‘That’s an extremely dangerous thing to do. She can blow up the whole place.’

Ms Tajdar explains that the admin was initially against her going in and out of the basement where the engine room is, but with the whole building so unbearably cold, even a short hour of heat makes such a big difference that they turn a blind eye to what she does.

‘Is this again ... that girl?’ Joe asks Tahmineh. ‘The same friend of yours who did all that daring stuff in my absence last week?’

Ms Tajdar, unaware of Soo and Joe’s prior acquaintance, gives a puzzled look to Tahmineh who nods, smiling.

‘It figures,’ says Joe, turning around and running his hands through his hair. ‘Look, I know what I’m talking about when I say she can easily cause an explosion. If you don’t want things to get any worse than they are, tell her to stay away from the engine room and stop messing with the faulty engine. Now leave and give her the message as soon as you can.’

The leaders guide the group towards the exit. Joe is in deep thought, moving right and left with his hands holding the back of his neck. ‘Damn it, girl,’ he says,

giving a hard kick to the front tire of a truck next to him. He then takes out a bottle of liquor from his toolbox but tosses it into a bush, swearing at himself.

Once the group heads out of Joe's territory, Tahmineh asks Ms Tajdar to take the kids to the bus, saying she'll meet them up front shortly.

Tajdar gives her a disapproving look. 'I wasn't born yesterday. Not only do you have a fiancé but also the man I saw back there didn't look at all interested in you, no matter how much you came on to him.'

Tahmineh narrows her eyes at her and heads back without much hesitation.

Joe is moving the vehicles around in a hurry and is taken aback to see Tahmineh return. Her way of walking catches his attention, like a model strutting on a catwalk, with all her curves visible by the way she has wrapped her veil around her and folded its sides up under her arms. 'Not now,' he swears under his breath. 'I don't have time for this.'

'Mr Engineer!' calls Tahmineh, waving at him with her naked forearm out of her veil. She stops near the vehicle he is in and adjusts her veil on her head by momentarily opening the front part of it, revealing all that a veil is supposed to hide underneath.

Joe comes out of the vehicle he has just parked and rushes straight to his oversized toolbox, looking annoyed.

'Listen,' she says with a wide smile, following Joe, 'I couldn't just leave without saying that ... how can I put this —'

'That you've got the hots for me and are wondering whether I'm available so that we can hit it off?' says Joe, putting some tools back in his tool box and bringing out a black leather toolbag.

Tahmineh appears speechless and starts blushing immediately. 'Well ... I wouldn't exactly say that, Mr Engineer.'

'In case you don't know, my name is Joe. And those who know Joe —'

'Yes, I was able to drag some information out of my best friend about you, Agha Joe.'

Crouching in front of his toolbox, Joe gets busy searching, moving its contents around and taking some stuff out. 'I assumed she had told you all about me, who I am, what I'm capable of and notorious for, in which case we wouldn't be having this unexpected chat at the worst possible time.'

'*Notorious?*' She shakes her head. 'No she hasn't.'

'It figures. So the question is, why then?'

Tahmineh goes around the toolbox to face him. 'Well because ... I admit I ... *had* ... hoped that maybe we could get to know —'

'It's quite obvious what *you*'d hoped for, looking the way you do under a veil, manipulating the Welfare staff into dragging those unwell kids here, and the rest. I meant *her*. Why wouldn't she tell her best friend all about Joe?' He stops his hasty search and stares at her, awaiting an answer eagerly.

'Don't even get me started on that weirdo friend of mine or try figuring her out. If she thinks what she does is a sin or *haraam* – which is almost everything – she'll spend a long time repenting and doing other crazy things to compensate for that. And one of her main no-nos happens to be talking behind others' backs. So, naturally she refused to say much about you.'

Joe sneers after letting out a mocking laugh and continues in a sarcastic way. 'Right! Gossiping about boys is any girl's number one pastime and she has said *nothing* to her best friend about me?' He then gets back to filling up the toolbag with the tools he has picked out.

Tahmineh affirms that all Soo has told her about is the incident where he saved her from a dog causing her religious father to move homes which is why he sees him as his enemy, in addition to a warning today against her coming here, without saying why.

'That's all?'

'You think I'm lying? If you knew what an eccentric cuckoo that friend of mine is ... never mind.'

Joe looks amazed and is in deep thought as he gets up and takes his work uniform out.

‘Look,’ she says with puppy-dog eyes. ‘I don’t need to know who you are and what you do. Unless you’re married, which is a different story, the rest can be —,’

‘Ha ha!’ he laughs at her comment, tossing his uniform in a corner. ‘Before we go any further with this futile conversation, for which I have no time right now, you should know that girls who get involved with me usually learn the hard way to never expect a permanent relationship from an extra bad boy, let alone marriage.’

‘Well, that is *my* problem, and you might be surprised at what life throws at you.’

He picks a few more things from the toolbox and hangs them down his belt. ‘Look, under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t say no but there are two problems here.’

He explains that firstly, he doesn’t accept veiled girls’ offers of friendship because no matter how cool they pretend to be about modern relationships, they are either not girlfriend material or their family does not want them to be. Either way, that is a big turn-off for him. And with heaps of women available to him unconditionally why would he bother messing around with the religious type?

He slams closed his toolbox and continues, ‘Secondly and most importantly, I am going through an emotionally tough time right now and can’t even think of getting a new girlfriend. Have a good day while you have the chance!’

Tahmineh is too determined to give up and tells him she is a good listener and confidante if only he would open up to her and that she wouldn’t be there if she weren’t sure about her family’s reaction. As her last attempt to wrap up the deal, she throws in a wink and places her number under the windshield wiper of the car they are standing next to.

Joe gives a thorough head-to-toe look at the smiling girl, and thinks for a second. ‘Fine, I’ll call you. Are we done here?’ asks Joe, picking up the leather toolbag and hanging it across his shoulder.

But unfortunately she doesn’t seem to be letting go yet and starts pushing her luck by asking what he has planned for them and when she’ll be seeing him.

‘You don’t listen, do you? And neither do you shut up,’ yells Joe with a threatening look, pulling out of his back pocket a set of small sharp tools all hanging from an oversized metal keyring, and slamming them all on the hood of the car next to him with such a sound that immediately brings other military staff to their windows.

Tahmineh winces while taking a few steps back.

‘That bloody bus is waiting for you and that crazy friend of yours might be blowing up herself and others any minute as we speak. Either you leave this instant,’ he says, holding the sharp tools in his hand and aiming them at her, ‘or I’ll have to demonstrate on you what your saint friend has failed to reveal about my certain other capabilities, with the help of these specially hand-crafted —’

‘*Ey vai!*’ Tahmineh is already running away looking frightened, slapping herself on the face, followed by a light scratching of the same area on her cheek, showing immense regret, and only making a quick short stop midway behind the army tank to take her high heels off.

Joe takes her number and heads hastily in the opposite direction.

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An hour later, even before Tahmineh and the group return, Joe is at the office of the Welfare manager, a thin short man in his sixties with thick glasses and a shaved face. ‘Young man, we thank you for your timely call, and I assure you that Miss Rustin has already been notified and will not be allowed in the basement under any circumstances.’ He hands back Joe’s IDs.

A boy around fourteen comes in with tea and many respectful gestures and greetings towards the guest and the elder, but Joe declines the tea offer. The manager instead brings out a bottle of whisky from a wooden cabinet behind him.

‘That used to be one of my favourites but no thanks. I’d like to inspect your heating system immediately, but first I need to check the pressure in the radiators, one on each level.’

‘Suit yourself,’ says the manager, putting the bottle back. ‘Farid will show you around, Mr Raad.’

As Joe gets busy with one of the radiators in the manager's office, the man continues, 'If I had known how dangerous it was, I'd have forbidden her. It's just that she's ... so ... how can I put this? She is so difficult to say no to. If you knew her you'd know what I mean.' He goes on describing Soo's merits and eccentric personality as well as her hard work and devotion as a volunteer, while Joe seems to be all ears. He says she has single-handedly raised more than a quarter of the total donations they received for the past year, and that is nothing compared to how much time, effort, and affection she has bestowed upon these kids.

As Joe and Farid head upstairs to the fourth and last level, loud sobbing and wailing of children are heard.

At the top of the stairs Joe points at a big sign on one of the rooms that reads Infants Ward. 'I hear that's where Miss Rustin works.'

'Yes, right in there, sir,' replies Farid.

They pass the crawling babies' ward which seems to be vacant and enter a vast room with nearly a hundred babies all under the age of one, wearing thick layers of winter clothing of different colours. Yet most of them have on their heads identical beanie hats, knitted with a mix of pink yarns and blue yarns, and each with a small pom-pom dangling from the top. The sharp smell of medicine, vomit, and dirty nappies is enough to send any visitor away.

A young male doctor with dark features in a white uniform is examining the sick ones with the help of one of the carers, Ms Partovi. There are far fewer cribs, play pens, changing tables, and other nursery items than the number of kids and no more than ten carers, and no sign of Soo. Some carers are constantly running after the crawling babies to keep them away from the heaters placed intermittently in different sections. Pillows are put as barriers around the heaters but they are easily climbed by the active babies. Two carers are feeding and changing the infants and attending to whoever needs urgent help in between. There is no order, no control, no maintainable segregated roles and only wild disarray everywhere. The scene is appalling, especially to a man like Joe who has never been fond of children, nor ever wanted to father one.

After a short introduction by Farid, Joe finds his way through the crawling babies towards the closest radiator near the area where the paediatrician is busy.

He puts his leather toolbag on a nearby desk where there is a large grey tote with a half-knitted baby hat of the same mixed colour of pink and blue still attached to the knitting needles and yarn balls visible through its wide opening. His bag accidentally tips over the tote, causing the knitted material, along with a couple of books, to fall out. He puts them back in. One is the Islamic mantra book, *Mafateeh Al Janan*, and the other a copy of the novel *Bolandihaye Baadgir*, the Persian translation of *Wuthering Heights*.

As in the presence of any other visitor, hoping for any contribution, the carers complain in begging voices about all the difficulties they face, as if visitors can do miracles to rectify their every problem.

Not long after, a crawling baby approaches Joe's tools, some of which are next to him on the floor. There is a half-torn dirty bandage covering the palm of the baby's right hand, where signs of burn are visible from the open corners.

'Get this kid away,' says Joe, looking over his shoulder.

'Sorry, sir,' says Mahin, one of the carers, who does what she is told but not before she slaps the baby in the face.

Joe is shocked by her reaction and jumps to his feet with anger rising in his eyes. He sees a few other babies crawling towards him and sits back on the floor, hiding some of his tools behind him and some in his leather bag.

'Control yourself, Mahin,' says Sorayya, another carer, following her to a nearby area where there are lockers and a few chairs.

'He doesn't eat; he doesn't sleep; he doesn't take his medicine. All he does is cry and touch forbidden dangerous things. For Heaven's sake, did their parents ever think of the consequences of what they were doing when they ...' Mahin doesn't continue her sentence. She instead bursts into tears and starts slapping herself in the face, '*Khodaya mano bebakhsh!* Forgive me, God! What has become of me, hitting a helpless six-month-old? I'm an evil woman.'

Sorayya takes the crying boy from her. 'No, you're not. You're just tired. It's been tough on all of us lately. Why don't you leave early today, and get some rest? The volunteers will be here soon.'

‘Sorry about that,’ says Sorayya, putting the little boy down in a crib, and picking up the three babies crawling near Joe. ‘This is not how we normally behave. Because of the heating and shortage of staff, we had to merge infants with older babies, and so the overwhelming pressures are pushing us over the edge.’

‘I am not exactly crazy about kids,’ says Joe, continuing with the radiator, ‘but what I hate even more and can’t turn a blind eye to is abuse and bullying. I’m glad she punished herself or else *I* ... let’s just leave it at that.’

The carers exchange a stunned look, and Mahin heads home after giving a hateful glare to Joe.

‘Thank God Soo didn’t see that,’ says Sorayya to the other carers. ‘You know how sensitive she is about these little ones.’

‘Where is that veiled angel anyway?’ asks the doctor, taking the stethoscope from his ears. ‘Isn’t she in today?’

‘She is but ...’ Partovi looks at Sorayya and seems hesitant to continue.

‘To be honest she left the room as soon as she heard you were coming upstairs to visit the babies,’ says Sorayya, putting down another infant on the changing table to be examined.

‘But why?’ asks the doctor, looking offended.

Partovi continues, ‘Well, not only does she not like being in the presence of *namahrams*, or speaking with them, she is not fond of people proposing to her, rather fed up with it actually, and yet you directly approached her with your proposal after she had already said no to your messenger, Mahin Khanom. So ...’

The loud bang Joe gives to the radiator startles everyone.

The doctor continues, ‘So you mean she is avoiding me just because I chose to woo her? Because I like her more than the other eligible girls my family and relatives nominate for me?’

‘With all due respect, sir, I wouldn’t pursue her if I were you.’ Partovi believes it is useless. It will only make things worse for everyone. The last time he tried, Soo stopped coming there for a week. She is a great help to them, and

they don't want her to be scared away just because of a futile hope. For whatever reason, she is not interested in any man.

'I'm a highly educated and respected professional, from a prestigious family.'

'No doubt you are, but it's not you, it's her. We hear she's turning down numerous other suitors too, regardless.'

'But again I'm not just any other suitor.' He asserts that hundreds of girls are dying to marry him. He doesn't care about Soo's other admirers. She is obviously playing hard to get. With a bit of insistence and persuasion she'll come around. 'Please give her this letter from me.' He hands Partovi an envelope.

The women share a look of disbelief. Partovi places the letter inside the same tote on the desk and the paediatrician leaves.

Soo is in the hallway behind a wall, keeping a watchful eye on the entrance to the ward. She takes a deep breath once the doctor goes down the curving stairway, yet she hides again, covering her mouth with her hand, when to her surprise Joe storms out of the ward holding an envelope. Neither of the men notices Soo.

Joe jumps a good ten steps, landing in front of the paediatrician, making him yelp. 'What the hell!'

'Pardon me, doc, but I couldn't help overhearing something which required my immediate attention.'

'Excuse me?' says the doctor, as Joe corners him.

'Evidently, your demanding insistence on a matter is causing disorder in this place at such a catastrophic time as this.'

'That's none of your business,' says the doctor, watching in amazement as Joe tears up his letter and puts the torn paper inside the man's shirt.

'Now which part of the word "no" do you not understand?' says Joe.

The doctor drops his medical briefcase and tries to shove Joe away but to his surprise Joe doesn't move an inch. 'Who the hell do you think you are, meddling

in people's business?' He throws a few useless punches at Joe, all of which are caught mid-air. His kicking attempts are just as ineffective.

'If you do have any problems understanding the word "no", it will become my duty to teach it to you right here right now,' says Joe, looking smug at the guy's frustration and misery.

'How dare you? Let me go you crazy *maadar sag*, son of a bitch!'

'Yes, indeed that's me, but this son of a whatever happens to be a lot crazier than you think. Now, do you or do you not understand that word?'

'I do. Stay the hell out of my way.'

Joe stays clear after picking up the doctor's briefcase. 'Allow me to help you with this heavy bag of yours, doc,' says Joe with a smirk, patting the doctor on the back. The doctor snatches his bag away, looking daggers; nonetheless he leaves after straightening himself up, swearing under his breath.

Soo, still hiding behind the wall, looks astounded. Joe goes back to the radiator and soon he too leaves the infants' ward.

'What was that man doing here, I mean the tall blond guy? What did he want?' asks the petrified Soo as she rushes back inside the ward.

'In a nutshell, that was an engineer. He confessed that he was a child hater who at the same time acted as children's rights advocate and threatened us to treat them well,' says Partovi, handing over to Soo a couple of babies and a bottle of medicine. 'Go figure people!'

'He was here to inspect the heating problem. What on earth are you freaking about now? Cross my heart he didn't propose to you,' says Sorayya with a laugh.

'Speaking of the unmentionable, you've got a new letter from the doctor, and believe me we tried, Soo,' says Partovi.

But then Partovi notices the letter missing from Soo's bag where she put it minutes ago, and the women, who had been too busy to notice Joe taking it, continue their chat about the whereabouts of the letter and what the paediatrician wanted.

All the while Soo is in a world of her own. ‘How did he know about the heating problem?’ Soo whispers, walking towards the window. ‘Tahmineh must have told him. And he is already here even before the bus arrives?’ Soo thinks deeply, giving each baby in her arms a kiss on the fingers as they curiously discover her face with their tiny hands. ‘What on earth am I to do?’ She writes a quick note and leaves the ward.

Once she finds out the engineer’s whereabouts from the staff, she heads to the forbidden engine room cautiously. Joe is on his back with his hands inside the engine and a pile of tools, different wrenches and pliers resting on his chest and some scattered all around him. The elderly security man, Mashd Abbas, is sitting on a chair outside the engine room, shaking his old silent radio and turning its knobs.

After calling his name a few times in a quiet voice, Soo finally catches his attention and he comes running to her, throwing his hands in the air, asking her to go back.

‘No, no,’ says Soo, giving Mashd Abbas a hushing gesture and going back up a few steps. ‘Please keep quiet. I’m not here to sneak in there.’

But they have already caught Joe’s attention and he too storms towards Soo. ‘Well, well, well, if it isn’t the hidden mistress of the castle, the stunning lunatic Bertha who’s about to set fire to this place, and kill herself at the end! It’s time I locked you up.’

Soo looks just as astonished as Mashd Abbas looks puzzled.

‘No, this is not Bertha, and I can handle this, sir.’ Mashd Abbas goes in between them, shielding Soo.

Joe moves the old man out of his way and faces her. ‘It figures. Too much gothic romance by the Brontë sisters does that to a reader, let alone someone who is already crazy. But I’m sure you hadn’t yet read Shelley’s *Frankenstein* ten years ago, or you wouldn’t have —’

‘*Franken what*, sir?’ Mashd Abbas interrupts him.

‘Never mind. Do all of you people have problems with the word “no”? You’re no better than that paediatrician suitor of yours whom I —’

‘Sorry to interrupt, sir, but she said she wasn’t here to go to the engine room.’

‘Oh, is that so? Then she must enjoy watching me in action, like the whole female species,’ says Joe, who receives a hateful look from Soo. ‘Guess she hasn’t learned her lesson from the past when I repeatedly told her to leave me alone and not to do what she stubbornly did.’

‘For your information, I only came to leave this note for you.’ She throws the note at Joe and heads upstairs. ‘And I do hope that I never have the pleasure of seeing you anywhere ever again.’

Joe picks up the note which reads:

*Mr Engineer! Although I don't know your real incentive for being here, I saw what you did to that paediatrician and under normal circumstances I would owe you a thankyou. But I can take care of myself, and in all likelihood you scared away the only doctor who would charge the Welfare half of what the other doctors do. What we're going to do without proper medical care for these sick children now, only God knows. So again – and I hope this is the last time I say this – I don't need you or want you to interfere with my life.*

Joe runs after her and stops her on the second floor. ‘Not so fast. If you don’t want others to see us talking, go back to the basement.’

‘What!?’

‘Or would you rather be carried there perhaps?’ says Joe, mixing his usual playfulness with an overshadowing assertion.

Soo looks offended but, knowing him, she complies without delay.

Seeing her back, Mashd Abbas gets ready to send Soo away, but Joe tells him off. ‘Don’t interrupt us, but stay here. I am a *namahram*, and she thinks she’ll be sent to hell if she talks to me in private. And give me that useless thing.’ He opens up the back of the radio and in less than a minute he hands it back to Mashd Abbas in working order and having turned up its volume to its loudest. Mashd Abbas thanks him and sits back happily, as Joe turns to Soo.

‘Look, missy. You don’t know me, at least not as much as you think you do. I’m not a stalker, nor am I after a pretty face, not when women are all over me all the time. That said, as upset as I am for the way you’ve been endangering everyone here, not to mention ignoring my request and not calling me, it is obvious that you care a whole lot about these children. And I will take care of the issue with the paediatrician. How about I fix the heating system – and yes I *can* do that in a few days’ time with some new parts and some repair work, and with no charge – if you agree to a date with me?’ He finishes his sentence with a smirk and a wink.

Soo looks even more offended now and heads upstairs but Joe blocks her way and continues, ‘This is the part where you will need to speak your thoughts.’

‘You’re asking me to sin in return for a highly recommended righteous deed, a *gonah* in return for a *mostahabb*’, says Soo with her gaze on the ground. ‘There are countless rewards from God for any attempt at bringing the heat back on, but I will not be punished if I neglect or refuse to do so, especially if I have to sin for it. Still, I’d consider it if I trusted you, or if I thought a date with you would lead to something good and positive for either of us, but I don’t.’

‘Look – and this is serious – it’s not what you think,’ says Joe.

‘What else is there to think? Are you saying there’s no immoral, personal interest in your encounters with me?’ She walks up a couple of steps but turns around angrily. ‘I wish I could say go to hell, but you’re already on your way there anyway. And by the looks of it, I’m not far behind, thanks to you.’

‘I’m not in the habit of begging for anything, let alone begging a woman, and I certainly don’t need to go after any woman for any reason when they grant me all my wishes wilfully and unconditionally.’

‘Well, congratulations on your misuse, abuse, and exploitation of the vulnerable females who fall for your outer appearance non-stop. Are we done?’

‘Not just the vulnerable, women in general tend to see irresistible qualities in me, but I never said they are all physical attributes, and no, I don’t lead them on either. You don’t know me. If you did, you too would fall madly in —’

‘Whether or not I ever get to know you, you’re the last person on earth I’d ever fall for.’

Once Soo leaves, Joe finishes checking the engine and returns to the manager’s office. After a short chat, the manager’s face lights up in happiness. ‘I’m thrilled, to say the least. Still, could you tell me in approximation how much —’

‘I don’t charge for these services,’ Joe interrupts the manager who looks slack-jawed by the unexpected announcement. ‘I need to use the phone.’

With much appreciation and gratitude, Joe is led into a back room for more privacy and quiet, where he dials a number. ‘Hey, it’s me,’ says Joe, over the phone. ‘Today’s party is off. We’ve got an urgent situation at an orphanage. The heat’s been off for ten days ... No, I’ll take care of the faulty engine myself but in the meantime, we’ve got other things to take care of.’

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On her way back home, Soo looks at her watch and instead turns into an alley which leads to the neighbourhood mosque. ‘What if I’m wrong?’ she whispers to herself. ‘Our religious sharia laws are at times ambiguous and so difficult to interpret; besides there are always exceptions to any such laws, especially in emergencies. We are talking about the wellbeing of innocent children here, whose lives might depend on whether the heat is brought back on. And now more than ever, since we have most likely lost our paediatrician too. My God, what if I’m being irrational and stubborn because of who he is and his background history with us Rustins, and sacrificing these poor little ones in the process? That would be a far greater sin than going out with a *namahram*. But then he is so on the opposite side of the extreme from where I stand. What is worse, I’m only human and as much as I hate to think about it, he is very attractive and powerful in every sense. What if I start having feelings for him and endanger my spiritual wellbeing? I can easily lose or pollute my soul in the process, over a guy like him.’

She enters the mosque and gets a chance to confidentially discuss her concern with the female religious scholar without mentioning who Joe is. The

lady in fact agrees that it is a dilemma, and leaves it up to Soo to decide. 'Dear child, knowing you, I'm certain you are quite knowledgeable about the religious rights and wrongs yourself. As I'm sure you're aware, the incentive or reason behind doing something, no matter what the deed looks like on the surface, is the most important part of a deed or what we call the soul of the deed as opposed to its body. No doubt it would be ideal to maintain both but at times when this isn't feasible, it is this soul for which the doer will be rewarded or punished. Now what do you think is the best route to take?'

She shrugs. 'I was thinking, perhaps, if he accepts to follow all the religious codes of conduct between opposite genders, in terms of proximity as well as eye, verbal, and physical contact, it would not be *haraam* but only *makrooh*, an abominable deed which is permissive in emergencies. Right?'

'Then follow your heart, because in this specific case that's what your faith obliges you to do, my dear.'

Soo leaves the mosque, whispering to herself. 'Who am I kidding? Knowing him he won't abide by any religious rules. He is only after one thing, like any other semi-alcoholic playboy.'

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The easy way out of avoiding Joe and the embarrassing situation awaiting her would be to not show up at the Welfare for a while until she is either strong enough to face him with an answer, or lucky enough to find him out of her sight and her life. However, the current crisis at the orphanage urges her to do otherwise. Besides, the following midday the Rustins receive a large load of donations for the orphans from their relatives, and therefore as someone who knows the Welfare, Soo accompanies them in their pickup truck to help them deliver the stuff. Once her two uncles take the bags in, they say goodbye to her and leave.

She walks in carrying the last bag of donations, taking small steps with uncertainty and reluctance written all over her face. 'Damn, I wish he had never seen me,' she says to herself quietly. 'How on earth am I supposed to find the face to approach him and tell him such a disgraceful thing? And what if he

doesn't accept my conditions?' She looks at her watch which shows 2:10 pm and takes a deep breath. 'Let's just hope he hasn't shown up today at all, and even if he has, that he is back to his base by now. But then who knows?' She sighs while rolling her eyes. 'He is the least restricted soldier ever. *Ya Allah!* O God! Please make this easy for me, for the sake of the one hundred twenty-four thousand prophets and the fourteen holy figures.' She starts whispering the names of the holy figures, '*Elahi, be Mohammad, va Ali, va Fatemah, val Hasan, val Hosain, va Ali ebne Hosain, va Mohammad ebne Ali, va Jafar ebne Mohammad, va Moosabne Jafar, va Ali ebne Moosa, va Mohammad ebne Ali, va Ali ebne Mohammad, val Hasan ebne Ali, va Hojjat ebne Hasan.*'

She is, however, in for a big surprise when she enters the building. The first noticeable difference is the pleasant warmth. Heading upstairs the place looks and sounds much calmer and more in control.

'Just in time to help us move the older babies back into their own ward,' says Partovi jubilantly.

'What!? How?' asks Soo.

'You're not going to believe what's happened,' says Sorayya.

Soo looks astounded and highly impressed by all the significant improvements both in the infants' as well as the crawler's ward. There are timber barriers of about one metre in height installed around the nursery with a couple of feet distance from the walls. There are plenty more oil heaters placed within this specifically designed narrow zone, away from the children's reach. The kids look happier without all the heavy winter clothing, and being allowed to worm their way around with far fewer restrictions and fuss from the carers. For the first time in a long time, things look relatively manageable and everyone content. While Soo absorbs everything with raised brows and a dropped jaw, the carers go on to narrate how the unbelievable renovation took place within a short couple of hours in the morning by the engineer and his partners.

'Unbelievable indeed. All I can say is thank God and thanks to him and his group,' says Soo, whose face looks stunned. 'But we need more carers to be able to divide the infants and crawlers into two groups.'

Soo is told that apparently a few new carers are just being inducted by the manager, along with a senior medical student who – with the universities currently closed – will offer the babies her medical assistance. Soo finds all this incredible. She knows Welfare can't afford to recruit new workers, and it is hardly unlikely for some volunteers to suddenly show up there all at once. However, she is told that it won't cost Welfare anything. Whether volunteer or paid, the new workers have been assigned and managed by the engineer's team. Moreover, she is told that these are only temporary facilities until the heat is brought back on by the engineer, who is going to fix the heat within a few days.

'Is this a miracle or what?' says Sorayya.

'The better question is, are they a godsend or what, and especially their blue-eyed boss who by the way was turning heads all round,' says Partovi with a naughty smile.

'Oh stop it. You should be ashamed of yourself,' says Sorayya.

'Fine, but seriously he was authoritative, strict, and rude enough to manage an army, yet with a unique sense of humour which is hard to explain. You had to be there,' says Partovi.

'Get real. You think she'd have been around? Huh, she'd have just been going on one of her hiding sprees again as always,' says Sorayya with sarcasm.

Soo is in deep thought and completely confused as she and the rest start moving the children's furniture between the two wards. 'But why? As grateful as I am, what is his main intention and objective in doing all this?' she says quietly to herself. 'Why did he not use my soft spot and vulnerability for the kids to his advantage? Is this his trickery, pretending to be what he isn't to win my trust and make me fall into his romantic trap? Is he trying to prove his arrogance to me? That he's got so many other women he can date that he couldn't care less about how I turned him down? Is he just playing games and messing with me to make a fool of me later on and have the last laugh? Or could it be the rare possibility that he did all this to free me from the difficult dilemma he had put me in, and cared enough to help the kids regardless, without pressuring me further? Whatever his motivation might be, I won't let him get away with his plans to have me. Yet, I have to admit he is highly captivating.'

Joe has left her completely preoccupied as she now constantly weighs the four possibilities in her mind. But what is frightening is that even though the fourth possibility is also by far the most far-fetched, it is enough to make her like him.

Tahmineh, who had gone straight home after bringing the teenagers back the previous afternoon, is just as surprised when she joins them later that day and finds out all that has been happening within the past twenty-four hours. Yet she finds Soo too distant to connect with and in a different world.

*'Astaghfer Allah rabbi va atoobo elaih,'* whispers Soo, walking back home with a mixture of strange and contradictory feelings while repeating the famous repentance mantra. 'Shame on me! How can I possibly allow myself to like a man who is a *namahram*, and not just any man, the unmentionable? Had I abided by the sharia laws as strictly as I should have, I wouldn't be left open and vulnerable to such whims. I seem to be getting weaker and weaker spiritually. What if, God forbid, I commit other sins, the ones I never thought I would? What am I to do with him if he keeps pressing my buttons like this? And then there is the upcoming ultimatum, not to mention my brother's wish. How am I going to defy the odds? God, please help me. I am desperate for a breakthrough, for a silver lining right now.'

Upon her arrival, she rejoices at the big smiles on everyone's faces. Salman is literally jumping for joy and lifts her up in his arms. 'Guess what, Sis? We've just heard some unbelievable news. Reza's brother Raheem and a group of his fellow inmates have been released. He is alive and free.'

'You're kidding!' Happy tears fill Soo's eyes. 'How? SAVAK never shows mercy to the Shah's opponents.'

'No, apparently it was the JANG that raided the prison and got them out a couple of nights ago. He is in hiding now but has indirectly notified his family.'

Though this doesn't change the fact that Soo still has a deadline to meet, the news makes her fall on her knees and raise her hands. 'Thank you, my Lord! You're extra quick.'

## Chapter 4: Party

A couple of days later, Soo and Tahmineh are in the middle of a heated argument at the Welfare, while carrying two big loads of washing downstairs to the first floor. Tahmineh, who is so happy that her feet don't touch the ground, had come in earlier and told how she had finally received a call from the engineer, inviting her to one of his regular Thursday night parties. Fully aware of his way of life with women, Soo has been trying to change her mind.

'Please save it. I told you nothing you say will stop me, Soo. I was just too happy to keep the news to myself, and you know I couldn't tell it to my family.'

'And there are plenty of good reasons for that.'

'Fine, it's totally wrong, but it's just too good to be missed.'

'Don't you have the slightest idea what goes on at these sinful gatherings? My God, before you know it, things can get out of control.' Soo lowers her voice. 'We are talking loss of virginity at the top of the list. You might even return home pregnant, for heaven's sake. Has this guy's physical allure blinded you to a point where you are willing to go against all your beliefs and manners? If your soon-to-be husband finds out you're not a virgin on your wedding night, you'll end up back at your father's home where you'll stay single for the rest of your life, living with everlasting shame and misery.'

'I resent that. You think I'm a child or a moron? I won't let things go that far.'

They reach the laundry area and place the baskets down. 'Well, I'd better leave now. I have a long way to go and need to get ready. I can hardly make it there on time,' says Tahmineh.

'You mean he's not meeting you somewhere to pick you up?'

'No, he gave me an address to a place called ... I forget,' she says, bringing out a small note from her bag, 'Oushan Fasham, which he said is an hour away, and that he'll meet me there around five.'

'What is twenty-twenty vision?' asks Soo, looking at the note.

‘That’s the entry password I should use, since he’s not going to be accompanying me.’

She leaves, taking with her Soo’s concentration, and leaving Soo with a lot to worry about.

Since the streets are packed with demonstrators, Tahmineh makes it there after an hour’s delay and with much anguish, only to find out right at the entrance that the invitee himself isn’t there yet either. She appears to be quite nervous. She has already unveiled herself even before getting out of the cab. With noticeable makeup, fake jewellery and mink coat, tight orange dress and high heels – most of which she has borrowed for the occasion – there is nothing in her appearance to indicate that she is a religious woman. The place is a huge villa with a swimming pool in the middle of the front yard and a spacious three-storey marble building at the back. Considering the wet and stormy weather around winter, the yard is completely covered with a waterproof shade cloth. Also a few oversized and loudly roaring heaters are set around the pool.

‘What in God’s name is this place?’ she whispers, as she takes her coat off.

Straightening herself up, she spots an area with a few empty seats. She is stunned to see numerous women and men wearing nothing but a bathing suit or shorts, enjoying themselves in the yard and going back and forth between the yard and the building. There is much laughter, dance, whistling, drinking, smoking, joking around, even touching and kissing, out in the open, while the heart-throbbing, loud music is played. There are different types of sweets, fruits, and snacks set on the tables. She puts a caramel toffee in her mouth and sits back absorbing the new environment as well as the experience.

Her thoughts are interrupted as a middle-aged, male waiter comes around with a tray full of drinks, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. ‘You must be new,’ he says, lowering the tray in front of her.

‘Yes,’ she says, looking uncertain about the content of the glasses.

‘The black and orange ones at the back row are just ordinary soda.’

With the confusion resolved, Tahmineh takes a glass of orange-flavoured soda. ‘Thanks’.

‘Who are you here with, *khanom*, ma’am?’

‘He isn’t here yet. I was invited by Joe Raad. The tall blond engineer with blue —’

‘Say no more. He needs no introduction here. Most of the women in this party are here for the same reason.’

‘Is that so?’ she says, looking not so thrilled.

The man gives a quick look at Tahmineh’s bag, out of which a corner of her black veil is visible. She thrusts it in nervously.

‘Since you don’t appear to be of the compatible type – and I mean it in a good way – you’d better watch out for what’s coming to you,’ says the waiter, sitting beside her and lowering his voice.

‘Excuse me?’

‘As much as women try to steal his heart and win his love, the guy you’re after has never been seen with any girl for more than a short time. He lives for the moment and moves on. And it sort of makes sense too, since there’re numerous sweethearts to last him a lifetime. Of course, there is much good in him as well, but in his relationship with women he is the ultimate playboy, a total jerk who won’t commit to anyone. I thought you should know before you too fall for the handsome monster and get your heart broken.’

‘I can take care of myself, thank you,’ says Tahmineh, turning her head away from him until he goes back to his work.

The music stops, and some of the dancers get busy with the refreshments until the next song begins playing. The wait for the most-wanted becomes longer than expected, and she sits there killing time by listening to the conversations around her, one of which particularly catches her attention. As it happens, a few men become the new occupiers of the empty seats near her, while proceeding with their chat about Joe and where he might be, since he is usually one of the first to arrive. One of them jokes about the great likelihood of him having gotten himself arrested again. The next one confirms Joe’s unique way of treating his business clients according to his own particular and inexplicable standards to which no one dares to object.

‘And why should they object?’ says their other friend, asserting that although Joe is still doing his military service, and his colleagues are all experienced engineers, the firm owes its name and reputation to no one but the hot-headed Joe Raad.

The first man mentions witnessing Joe on a few occasions asking wealthy clients for over twice as much as the market rate for their projects, and as outrageous as it was, they all signed the contract anyway. ‘No doubt he is damn good at what he does, but I mean come on, dude, have some mercy on the poor rich.’ Their laughter starts to jolt the liquor in their glasses.

Another relates instances to the contrary, where Joe has taken on projects without a dime of profit. He reaches a reasonable conclusion that the first category of jobs makes up for the second not-for-profit or pro bono ones, and quite satisfactorily too, or else Joe wouldn’t be able to bring all that profit to the firm, not to mention to himself.

‘Well, he wouldn’t become a senior partner in his early twenties otherwise, would he? So you do the maths,’ says their friend.

‘What he does with all that money, no one knows. He sure doesn’t spend it on his women, and they’re all over him like bees on pastry.’

They continue to laugh. As the music starts playing again, the men get up and leave. A young man approaches Tahmineh with a drink for her and asks her for a dance. She declines, telling him she is waiting for her date. As he tries to be persuasive, the mere mention of Joe’s name is enough to make him disappear quickly into the crowd.

Soon a woman in her late twenties, who introduces herself as Jila, sits beside Tahmineh, with a cigarette on her lips and dressed in a short-sleeve, purple evening outfit. The two engage in a conversation, and as expected the subject matter becomes no other than the person in whom they share a common interest.

According to Jila, Joe is the youngest of three children, and the only son. His sisters are much older. Apparently his mother only had him to overcome the patriarchal pressures of not having produced a male heir, while his father was actually fine with two girls. Unfortunately, there were complications after delivery and she died a week after he was born. His father has never overcome the

pain of this loss. The incident has scarred Joe badly, leaving him with resentful feelings towards marriage and having children. Some say that is why deep down he hates himself, people, and life in general, and others believe that is what has turned him into a narcissist.

‘Poor thing. That’s awful. I admit I’ve seen him act outrageously and in a violent way, but he also cares a whole lot about others.’

Jila shrugs. ‘Beats me. There is no explanation for how and why he can at times be so good-hearted and generous, while at others quite the opposite.’

‘It’s just so hard to believe that a guy with so much of everything would not want to get married and have a family of his own.’

‘There is just no reason for him to settle down. He lives for fun and excitement. A lifestyle like his requires a lot of power, financially and physically. And boy has he got both! So obviously he has no need or time to become an ordinary family man. There is also his dedication to his heroic side.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Making sure things go the way he wants them to, regardless,’ she says, lighting another cigarette. ‘And yes that means force, threats, and breaking the law to get his way. If his heart is set to right what he thinks is wrong, the sky is the limit to how much time, effort, and money he will put into it. So now tell me if you think a chap like him can ever get married?’ Jila calls a waiter, picks up a couple of glasses of wine, and hands one to Tahmineh.

‘Yeah, why not? I might as well go with the flow.’ But she starts coughing and nearly chokes pouring half a glass down her throat all at once, as if it is water.

‘Are you alright? Is this your first ever drink? I’m sorry I should have warned —’

‘And definitely my last.’

‘Don’t worry; everyone has that awful experience the first time around, but I assure you it won’t be your last. Just wait till it kicks in.’

There is a sudden round of applause, and gleeful cheers shake the roof as Joe arrives. He takes his clothes off immediately and dives into the pool with only

his long boxers on. A few girls and boys follow him into the water, getting on each other's backs and having fun. He, however, doesn't seem interested and is out of the water and into the building in less than a minute. Soon he returns in a singlet and shorts, drying his hair with a towel. Tahmineh waves at him and, having spotted her, he comes her way. She stands up, as a sign of respect to the newcomer.

'I need to talk to someone in private,' says Joe, sending away the surrounding girls who are following him, and seem to be having a hard time taking their hands off him.

'*Salaam*,' says Tahmineh.

'You made it.' He sits next to her, placing the towel around his neck and filling up his plate with eatables.

'I wouldn't miss it for the world. How are you?'

A different waiter, around his own age, offers him drinks, and he takes a glass of cola. The man looks astounded.

'Do you mind?' says Joe with a look that sends the waiter away.

After a short initial chat and before saying much about himself or getting to know Tahmineh, Joe changes the subject, which takes his date by surprise.

'So, tell me about that crazy friend of yours, the auto-mechanic guru. Anything wrong with her?' asks Joe, sipping his cola.

'What!? What do you mean?'

'Well, she seems to be very appealing to men, and I mean in every sense, a complete package in fact, and yet she is still single. So ...'

'In a way, a mixture of nothing and everything is what's wrong with her.'

Joe lets out a mocking laugh. 'That certainly answers my question.'

'Wait a minute!' She gives him a suspicious look. 'In case you're having certain thoughts about my friend, you should know that I've promised not to talk about her personal life to anyone. Secondly, she is extremely God-fearing and not your type. Thirdly, she is not even interested in marriage, which is the lawful

religious type of relationship with any man, let alone other types. Believe it or not, she has turned down dozens of marriage proposals so far and still does.'

'So I've heard.'

'Hey Joe, there's a call for you,' Joe's friend interrupts him by shouting from one of the upstairs windows, carrying on his back a woman in a bathing suit, both laughing loudly.

It takes a good half hour for Joe to be back where he was, having been taken in different directions and being held up by others on his way to his new date, Tahmineh.

'So, you were saying about that veiled friend of yours,' he says, sitting back and popping a whole grape cluster into his mouth.

But Tahmineh is not herself in their second round of conversation. The more they talk the more drunk she looks and acts, until she loses her balance. Joe catches her just before her head crashes into the square-shaped table in front of them. Those sitting near her all confirm she's had a few strong drinks while he was gone. Joe lays her down on a sofa nearby and covers her up with her own veil, asking others around her not to offer her or let her have any more drinks, as he heads back inside the building.

'Last time I checked, this room had a lock, but please don't mind me,' says Joe, walking in on a half-naked couple making out in a room. He rushes to the phone and dials a number, making the embarrassed couple start getting dressed. 'Hey, I need a van or a car. There is a girl who's gotten herself badly drunk. How soon can you get here? ... A cab won't do. She's passed out. She needs someone with her ... That orphanage is the only place I can think of ... No I can't call her family or send her back to her home, even if I knew where she lives. She is a *chadori* girl from a religious household ... Never mind how and why she is here.' He looks at his watch and then glares at the half-open drawer of the bedside table, where packs of condoms are visible. 'Just get a damn vehicle here as fast as you can.' He hangs up and kicks the drawer closed, just as the couple leave the room.

He locks the door and stays in there in deep thought, ignoring the girls who intermittently come knocking at the door asking for him.

While Tahmineh is having her first experience of the new modern world, Soo has been worried sick thinking of the most feasible way to save her unruly friend. She has left the Welfare right after Tahmineh did, and has been preoccupied by thoughts of how to deal with this situation, having the obligation to keep her own, as well as her friend's, identity hidden.

She can't ask her father or brother to go there, or take her there to help her friend. Neither can she go there alone looking like this. What would a veiled woman be doing in a mixed party? And she certainly can't take her veil off and pretend to belong there, like other invited women. She thinks as she rushes home from the Welfare. She is left with only one option, and that is only if God helps her pull it off.

Soo is hoping to use Ebrahim's old motorcycle, which she and her brother used to ride for fun in their front yard. But since Ebrahim developed a back problem, and Salman has over a year to get his bikers' licence, and because it is against the law for Soo as a female to ride a bike outside, the vehicle hasn't been out of their yard much. Except for a few exceptional occasions, it has been kept covered, season after season, waiting for Salman to reach legal riding age of eighteen.

However, this isn't the only thing Soo needs approval for. After reaching home, behind her family's back, she has managed to wrap her chest tightly with Khanom Jaan's waist support, to flatten her upper body curves. She has put on Ebrahim's long, grey winter coat, buttoned in front, reaching all the way down her knees. Underneath the coat, she is wearing a hooded sweatshirt, with its hat covering her head. She has rubbed in some black shoe-wax on the lower parts of her face, as an attempt to hide her gender as well as her identity. She is wearing a pair of jeans and Ebrahim's dark blue running shoes which are a few sizes big for her. She secretly meets her brother in the yard without her other family members finding out, and he is furious at what she is up to.

'You pulled this trick once before and used the motorbike outside, making me cover up for you which I did. But I told you I was never ever going to do it again.'

‘That was different. That was only because of my love for motorcycles, and only for practice and fun. This time it is quite serious. We have a duty to help out others in need.’

‘If the person was about to be kidnapped, tortured, or killed, yes. Your duty ended when you explained to this person to do the good deed and stay away from the bad deed. You’ve done the *Amr be maaroof va nahy az monkar*.’

‘And I respect that person’s decision, but this is now saving someone when you know they are about to be harmed. It is now my duty to step in and yours as well, because now you know about it too.’

Salman swears to himself inaudibly while pacing the floor in frustration.

‘Look, all I’m asking is for you to take the bike outside in the alley, so that if our elders find out it’s gone, we can tell them it was you who took it out, and it wouldn’t be a lie. You’ve ridden it outside many times. Dad knows the government is still not very strict about teenage boys under eighteen without licences. He’d understand. Besides the traffic police are too busy with the demonstrations to find time to check riders’ licences.’

‘Why don’t you let us get a cab and go together, which is the safest, most rational way, or wait a while until Dad brings the car back?’

‘I told you with the main streets so crowded these days, I need to use shortcuts through small alleys to get there quick, or else I won’t make it there on time.’

‘You’re a girl. Assuming you can fool everyone about your gender, what if something happens to you? If Dad and Khanom Jaan find out, we’ll both be in hot waters, and I mean burning hot.’

‘You wouldn’t have been so adamant if I had told you I was going to go for a bike-ride just to have fun, would you? Do you really think I am that stupid to be endangering myself doing something I can’t manage? Please *Dadash*, Bro, I haven’t got all day.’

‘Fine, but once I hand you the bike, I’m following you in a cab. Give me the damn address.’

Soo gets to the villa which is the only property at the end of a dead-end lane. The first striking thing is the presence of huge, powerful motorbikes parked near the premises, along with many cars. 'Wow! These bikes are extraordinary. They must belong to his mates,' she says, approaching the bikes.

A few minutes later, inside the entrance, she becomes the subject of a suspicious glare from the doorkeeper. 'Who are you, and who are you here to see, dude?'

'I'm Rustin, a special guest of Joe Raad's,' replies Soo in a deep male voice.

'Never seen you here before.'

'I'm new.'

'Do you have the password?'

'Yes, twenty-twenty vision.'

Soo enters the yard not long after Joe goes inside to make the call and while he is deeply absorbed in thought inside the same room, waiting for the vehicle to arrive. 'God, please forgive me for stepping into such places and protect me,' she says, while sniffing the appalling smell of alcohol and opium filling the air. With the way Tahmineh is spinning her black veil in her hand, laughing loudly, and making a fool of herself, not only does Soo easily spot her, it is also crystal clear that she is drunk.

Soo finds her way through the crowd and grabs Tahmineh's arm. 'It's just me. Let's go. You can't stay here.' The music is loud enough to let her use her own voice and as such Tahmineh doesn't get too shocked to take her for a stranger.

Jila comes close. 'Excuse me! Who are you?'

'Tis Soo ... my friend who ... looks ridiculous t'day... manly in fact,' replies Tahmineh in a hardly intelligible voice.

Soo introduces herself as Rustin, a friend of Tahmineh's, who will be taking her home.

'But she is someone's date for tonight, and believe me he is no one to be messed with.'

‘Excuse me,’ says Soo, wrapping Tahmineh’s arm around her own shoulder and taking her away.

Jila goes and brings Tahmineh’s bag. ‘Good luck! And be quick before —’

‘Hey, what’s that guy doing? Who is he? Joe finds out he has touched his girlfriend, he is history, and so are we who were supposed to be watching her,’ says a man, coming out of the nearby bathroom.

‘He is probably one of Joe’s own parties,’ says Jila, in a shaky nervous voice. ‘The girl wasn’t feeling well, so Joe must have asked him to come and collect her.’

‘No, that’s nonsense. He is not familiar. He might be stealing Joe’s girl as we speak,’ says another man, turning all the attention to Soo and Tahmineh, who reach the exit and are out of sight.

Noticeable turmoil is now aroused in the gathering. A few big-built men get up alert as they realise the magnitude of the issue if what they assume is actually true. They immediately shout and notify Joe who runs out of the building and into the yard, irritated. ‘Who the hell was it?’

‘He said he was Rustin, but your date was calling him Shoo, or Soo, or something like that,’ says one of Joe’s mates.

Looking astounded, Joe and his men chase after the intruder and Tahmineh.

Outside the villa, Soo has secured Tahmineh on her bike and used her veil as a belt fastening the two of them together. She starts the engine. ‘Please don’t wiggle and hold on tight’.

‘Holy cow! Yoohoo. I didn’t know you could ride a bike,’ says Tahmineh, laughing.

‘How can I repair bikes as well as disable them and not ride them, you idiot?’ says Soo, storming away, just as the men show up. Joe looks shocked at what he is witnessing. His men get on their motorcycles but to their further astonishment, none of the bikes starts.

Soo comes to a temporary stop in the middle of the alley, reaches into her pocket and brings out a handful of small, metal pieces with some wiring attached

to them. She shows them to the men before dropping them on the ground and taking off at full speed.

‘Never mind,’ says Joe with his eyes locked on Soo. ‘She has messed up the bikes. Just let her go!’

‘*She? Her?*’ say the men. ‘A woman did all this? To us of all people? Then let’s use the cars or contact the other guys to catch her.’

‘I said let her go. Just go back inside.’ Joe keeps staring at Soo until she turns into the main road and is out of sight. Even after the men are all back to what they were doing, and the smoky fume of her bike vanishes into the air, he still keeps looking far into the alley where she disappeared to, and only one word to say. ‘Nice!’

About an hour later, Salman gets to the address but finds no sign of Soo, nor their bike. He is just as stunned as Soo was to see all the strange-looking bikes parked outside. As soon as he gives his sister’s description to the doorkeeper, saying he is looking for a tall, thin man, wearing a long grey coat, the man sends him away angrily. He says the guy turned out to be a woman who stole a VIP from the gathering. He threatens Salman that he will notify the host if he doesn’t leave instantly. Having found out Soo has been able to accomplish her mission, Salman heads back home.

Knowing what awaits Tahmineh if her father, brothers, fiancé, or even distant male relatives find out about her unauthorised outing, Soo calls Tahmineh’s home and talks to her mother. Pretending all is well and trying to mislead her other family members who can hear their conversation, Tahmineh’s mother gives Soo the address to her elder daughter’s home, saying that is where Tahmineh is staying for the night. Having got what the mother was indirectly implying, Soo takes Tahmineh to her sister’s home. She then heads home but waits outside until Salman returns. Luckily, they manage to succeed without their family finding out. But there is one thing that Salman keeps mentioning to Soo. His instincts tell him that those bikes belonged to the JANG.

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The following morning, Soo receives a brief thankyou call from the sobered-up Tahmineh. She is still too sick with hangover, headache, not to mention guilt and fear, to say much else to her rescuer. So, it isn't until a couple of days later at a fundraising event that the girls meet again. Still, the stadium being a mad house and Soo too busy with her role as one of the three main organisers, the girls don't get a chance for a long chat. However, afterwards as they head straight to the Welfare, they are finally able to have a more detailed talk about the taboo party.

Tahmineh admits her regret in pursuing Joe and confirms that Soo has been right about him all along. Her findings are not merely based on what she has seen and heard at the party. She has secretly had a male relative run a background check on Joe, and his report – which she only received last night – has been indicative of shocking facts about him. He is a wild narcissist and a playboy, who hates marriage and children, and all the rest that are already known to Soo, including his outlaw nature. She tells Soo she has given up on him and will stay away from him no matter what, as there is no chance of winning such a man's heart.

'But then ... that's not all ... you see ...' continues Tahmineh with an uncertain tone of voice and look.

'What?' Soo looks dumbfounded. 'You've finally got him all figured out without making me talk behind his back. That's what you were dying to discover, so what is that dubious look on your face?'

'Well maybe, but not exactly.'

'What do you mean?'

Their talk is interrupted as they enter the Welfare where they see the manager and a few other staff outside his office, saying farewell to Joe, shaking hands with him, and thanking him with much fascination and appraisal along with the inevitable *ta'arofs*, empty sugar-coated compliments. Soo tugs at Tahmineh's veil, and they quickly head towards the staircase to avoid any possible confrontations by Joe. Yet, they reluctantly stop when they hear him right behind them.

‘Good to see you both safe and sound, I mean after the mission impossible by that motorbike escape of yours,’ he says playfully, facing Soo. ‘Still that doesn’t mean I won’t be getting you later on.’

The girls exchange glances, and Tahmineh tries to leave. ‘I’ll just be upstairs.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ says Soo.

‘This won’t take long.’ He blocks their way, still looking at Soo.

Soo pulls Tahmineh’s arm and stops her.

Joe continues, ‘My job here is done, and all without asking you for anything. I told you I never beg a woman. In saying that, the completion of my work doesn’t mean that’s the end of our —’

‘Mr Engineer!’ Soo interrupts him. ‘You’ve left me and everyone else here speechless with all your kind and generous work in helping this organisation. And for that we are all grateful, and you’ll be in our prayers.’ She looks around nervously and brings her voice down. ‘But I do hope that this is the end of your encounters with me and my friend.’

‘I’m afraid that’s not possible. As I mentioned I still have a proposition to make, and not the kind you might —’

‘And I declined. And again no. I don’t want to get to know you better. I know more than enough already, especially through our most recent encounter and even regardless of that.’

‘Look, you can hate my guts all you want but only after you get the whole picture. That date wasn’t what it looked like. Even if your friend can’t remember much of anything after she,’ he says, lowering his voice, ‘got drunk, she must have told you the rest.’

‘The rest of what? That you did not invite her to your playboy mansion, or got her intoxicated or planned to ... ?’

‘You haven’t told her everything, have you?’ Joe addresses Tahmineh with a disgusted look. ‘Or she wouldn’t be blowing this out of proportion.’

‘There is nothing more to tell,’ continues Soo. ‘If I hadn’t seen my friend intoxicated like that, with my own two eyes in that satanic den of yours, I might be willing to consider other possibilities. You tried to take advantage of a veiled religious girl, when you knew she wasn’t your type. With all others seemingly dying to have you, you certainly stooped to your lowest by being inconsiderate and disrespectful towards people like us with certain beliefs, just to prove to the world you’re the role model who can get his hands on any woman he wishes.’

‘Not that I have to explain myself, but you’re dead wrong. She was there only upon her own insistence, whereas I had already told her I didn’t date religious girls, and she certainly got boozed of her own free will. I never intended to get her drunk or do anything to her. When you came to get her, I was actually inside trying to find the best way to take her out of there. If she puts that big mouth of hers into good use for once, she can tell you a lot about what exactly happened before she passed out.’

Soo’s surprised face turns to her friend.

‘I have to admit —’

Tahmineh’s confession is disrupted when a few members of Welfare staff come downstairs, saying farewell to a couple of sisters who are permanent carers. Joe moves out of their way. The two sisters are leaving the country. The political climate is worsening, and they fear persecution due to their husband’s ties with the royals. They are, nonetheless, happy to see the volunteers there, and by the time the women are done saying goodbye, Joe has already left.

The girls finally head upstairs to their ward and are sent directly to the kitchen. ‘So tell me. What was this proposition of his that you never told me about?’ asks Tahmineh, while they get busy making formula for the infants’ next feeding.

‘What else? He’s been asking me out, all the while insisting it isn’t what I think,’ says Soo, in a sarcastic tone of voice.

‘Really? It all makes sense now. It sure explains a lot.’

‘What sense? *You*, my friend, are the one who’s got a lot of explaining to do.’

‘Just what I was trying to tell you, but we were interrupted when we entered the building and saw him.’

‘My God! You mean he was right? And you watched me lash out at him like that?’

Not only does Tahmineh confirm all that was stated by Joe, but also in her account of that day’s events, there are a few unexpected points which take Soo by surprise, just as much as they have surprised Tahmineh. Soo was already aware of Joe’s heroic side, but the rest of what she hears, such as his traumatic past and his Robin Hood manner of dealing with his business clients, amazes her. Yet, nothing stuns Soo as much as certain pieces of information about his personal life, namely Joe’s not being himself lately, his recent, unanticipated lack of interest in girlfriends and alcohol, and his non-stop attempts during his short time with Tahmineh to find out about Soo.

‘Before I passed out, all he wanted to know about was you. He wasn’t into me or any other girl. I think the whole date with me was his means to that end. I’d say this guy really wants you, Soo, and not in his ordinary lecherous way.’

‘I don’t want to hear it.’ Soo keeps silent for the rest of the day as there has been much to take in and contemplate, most of which is contradictory to what she knew before. The discovery is a turning point for Soo. Although she is thrilled to see him leave, she is now faced with other concerns. But what terrifies her the most, is her strong feelings for the worst possible man. As always, she resorts to her midnight whispers with the Almighty for redemption.

## Chapter 5: Rasool

Luckily Soo's prayers are answered. Joe has been absent from her life – at least physically – for the past week. However, the Rustins face another hectic day over the family's biggest concern. Soo's increasing hours outside home, her frequent absence from the proposal gatherings, her continued lack of interest in the suitors, and more importantly her approaching deadline, are all bad news to the Rustins. But that is not all. Something else along the same lines, yet far more disturbing, has aggravated Ebrahim today. He is pacing the red-rugged floor near the living room window. Khanom Jaan is next to him, reading verses of the Qur'an and blowing her utterances at him intermittently to placate him. Shireen is holding a large glass, insisting in vain that he should take some herbal sherbet traditionally proven to calm the nerves. Although no one knows why, Ebrahim has just enforced certain restrictions for Soo's outside activities, decreasing them to almost nil. Salman has also received new instructions to always accompany her outside, on those rare occasions, and is now on his way to bring her home. But she enters the front yard just as her brother is leaving.

'Thank God you're finally home,' says Salman, in a terrified tone of voice. 'They sent me to come and get you.'

'Why? What's wrong?'

'Dad is enraged.'

'Over what?'

'He is too upset to talk. It must be you and your suitors. What else?'

The two siblings hurry inside the living room. One first look at Soo as she arrives, and Ebrahim rushes towards her. '*You* tell me what to do with you, because I don't know anymore.'

Khanom Jaan tries to hold him back, while she and Shireen go in between the father and daughter as a protective barrier. '*Toro Khoda kazme gheyz kon!* For the sake of God, swallow your anger! God is with those who are patient,' says the matriarch, with her hands on his chest, and Shireen hiding Soo behind her.

Ebrahim becomes short of breath.

‘Please calm down or you’ll have a panic attack or *na’oozo bellah*, God forbid, a heart attack, *agha*,’ cries Shireen.

Salman gets a hold of a chair, and they make Ebrahim sit.

‘*Khoda margam bedeh*. God, take me now.’ Khanom Jaan begins beating herself and goes on her knees in front of her son. ‘Death is inevitable and comes to all, but I cannot witness my own child’s death and funeral. *Khoda oon roozo nayareh*. May God never bring that day!’

Shireen and Sara try to stop her and massage her limbs. Everyone looks devastated and in tears.

Soo is petrified. ‘*Ghorboonet beram, Baba!* May I be your sacrifice, Dad! You know that I’d die for you. The last thing I want is to see you and our family like this.’ Her eyes turn to Shireen. ‘Tell me what’s happened, *Maman?*’

Shireen shrugs her shoulders. ‘He’s been waiting for you to —’

‘I’ll tell you what’s happened and what’s happening behind our backs,’ yells Ebrahim. ‘And this is only just the beginning of the catastrophe, the tip of the iceberg.’

Earlier that week, some people saw boys throwing notes at Soo, and some saw Soo in the proximity of other boys from the religious minorities. Since she is still single, they have started rumours that she must either have a boyfriend, or be interested in finding one, and maybe even a relationship with a non-Muslim.

Khanom Jaan starts scratching and slapping herself in the face. ‘I knew it. Didn’t I tell you about people’s big mouths? The only thing I don’t know is the time of my death, which I hope to God is right now.’

They try to stop the elder, while Soo denies all the false allegations and swears to Allah and the holy Qur’an that she has always done her best to keep herself and her family’s reputation immaculate.

Ebrahim says he knows his daughter and trusts her, but that is not enough to protect their honour.

Apparently when the news reached the high school – his workplace – he has stormed to the mosque where the gossip was first heard. Seeing him enraged, his

concerned friend and colleague, Mostafa, accompanied him. Just before the noon prayers, they found some of the gossipers. But he and his friend's explanation in Soo's defence didn't outweigh the overpowering magnitude of the slanders, and hence he is left defeated in protecting the good name and stature of his family.

'You think Mostafa and I didn't try to convince them otherwise? You think we just stood there and took all the nonsense, untruthful accusations, shame and blame?' he continues yelling. 'Don't you know *we can close any gate but not people's mouths*? How many Muslims, how many real Muslims do you think there are among all those who spend hours in mosques, pretending to be who they are not? In Islam, talking behind people's back is likened to eating your own dead brother's flesh, which is disgustingly *haraam*, let alone a slander, which is way worse a sin. I was about to collapse right there if it hadn't been for Mostafa.'

Seeing Ebrahim upset at the mosque, Mostafa suddenly came up with a white lie to save his deeply troubled friend by declaring that Ebrahim's daughter has just been engaged to be married. That it was done through a private ceremony due to the current unsuitable atmosphere of the country, and that's why the public hasn't heard about it yet. Luckily the gossipers apologise for their misinterpretations and back off, since it would be quite unlikely for a married or an engaged girl to be interested in an immoral relationship, especially a girl from the Rustin family. But the consequences of the lie, along with the guilt and its impact on their family's future, have brought additional, unbearable agony. When asked later by Ebrahim, Mostafa explains that he thought with the ultimatum in place, it would be just a matter of a few days, or a week until she got married anyway, so he saw nothing wrong in making people believe her marriage had already occurred.

'He had to tell a lie to save me and my family,' continues Ebrahim. 'How do you think that makes me feel? We made him commit a sin to buy us back our almost-gone face and *aberu*. Putting that aside, how can we keep lying to everyone, who'll be congratulating us, asking us who your fiancé is, or when the wedding reception is, and so on. How long can we keep this up? People are going to find out the truth. And that's not all. With everyone thinking you're now engaged, there won't be any future suitors knocking on our door. What in God's name are we going to do, *Sooreh*?'

Realising the depth and gravity of the matter, and in light of the fact that Iranians tend to go to extremes in showing sentiments and emotions, both Khanom Jaan and Shireen start wailing louder than before.

Soo throws herself at her father's feet in tears. 'I promise you that people won't find out, because I won't let them. Now that Uncle Mostafa has told the public I am married, then be it. If you notify Uncle Ali's family, I'm ready to accept my cousin's proposal.'

Her strategic and timely decision extinguishes the fire and works like a charm. They take a deep breath of relief and settle down, but only for a few seconds. To her surprise, and after prior consensus to keep the disgraceful rumours secret, the elders make an immediate call to Haji Ali, Khanom Jaan's eldest son.

Soo moves away, thinking and whispering to herself. 'To hell with love! Who was I kidding? I knew this day was coming, even with Sara's urgent issue resolved. Now that this makes everyone happy, I might as well embrace it and make the most of it.'

The bigger surprise, however, is the other side's instantaneous arrangement for a quick meetup. Within two hours, three cheerful faces show up, all well dressed, carrying bunches of flowers with generous sprays of jasmine – Soo's favourites – and oversized boxes of some of the most expensive pastry on the market. Khanom Jaan brings in a tray with a small charcoal-grill, on which the seeds of *esfand*, wild rue, are popping, traditionally known to keep the evil eyes away from the happy occasion, and especially from her two beloved grandchildren. After the gleeful initial greetings, they proceed with the main topic, but no one seems interested in observing the usual formalities of a proposal gathering. They are close relatives after all. Besides, everyone is fed up with it, having gone through all that, many times in the past.

Soo and her husband-to-be, a tall twenty-nine-year-old with dark features and jet black hair, are given permission to have a private chat. This is religiously allowed between *namahrams*, since the two now have genuine intentions to get married. Soo looks shy and nervous. She indicates that if Rasool and others don't have any objections, her pre-nuptial terms and conditions are the same as they

were before, hence there is no need for a private talk. This is exactly what she did the first time around, writing her wishes down and handing them to Rasool, who signed both copies, and they each kept a copy without letting anyone else know what she wanted from him.

As always, all the eyes turn to Khanom Jaan for her advice and opinion. She gratefully states that though she appreciates their respectfulness, she firstly wants to hear from Rasool. Partly because of his considerateness and familiarity with Soo's reservedness about being in a private room with a *namahram*, and also because of Soo's reasoning behind it, Rasool concurs with her idea to skip the private chat. Khanom Jaan then leaves it to her two sons, as the heads of their families, to decide for their youngsters. Consequently, the eyes travel to Haji Ali, a stocky man around sixty, with grey hair and beard, and then to Ebrahim, both of whom approve Soo's request.

Rasool's mother, Ameneh, a big-built brunette in her fifties, however, looks uncomfortable. To avoid being face to face with her brother-in-law, who is the only *namahram* to her in the room, she has been sitting at a certain angle to Ebrahim. But she properly covers herself and all her heavy gold and jewellery with her black veil, and turns her head towards the men with only her eyes and nose visible. After asking for permission to talk, something she already knows she is entitled to, she starts with a long *ta'arof*, a courteous initial prologue to her speech by mentioning all the merits in Soo and her family, before getting to the main point.

'But surely you can all understand that no parent wants their child to enter any kind of contract and be surprised later on, especially a marriage, which is a lifelong binding. Like they say, *a hidden deal destroys friendship*.' She faces Rasool after giving a criticising look to her husband. 'You may not want to, and for some reason others present in this room – including your father – are again not objecting to this, but I as your mother wouldn't mind knowing what her conditions have been all along, since as you remember, it was never revealed to us the first time around either.'

A silent tension arises among the seven Rustins, but Ebrahim's side of the family, Khanom Jaan included, keeps quiet. And they have a good reason. They

are too appreciative of Soo for her sudden change of heart and saving them, to be pressuring her any further and pushing their luck. Yet, their more-than-usual permissiveness toward Soo is unintelligible to Ameneh, who is obviously determined to find out the content of the pre-nuptial agreement.

Rasool politely explains to his mother what he told her a few months ago, that this is between Soo and himself, and he'd rather keep it that way. He again assures her that firstly Soo's requests are not materialistic in nature, and secondly they are nothing he and his family can't manage.

Having no other opponents on her side, Ameneh gives in to the majority and lets the matter be settled with no further arguments.

Considering the haste, an expedited religious matrimonial gathering, *aghd konoon*, is held in two days' time on the weekend at Ebrahim's house. Soo and Rasool officially and religiously become husband and wife by signing the marriage contract in front of the spiritual sheikh and in the presence of their own family circle and only close relatives, namely cousins, aunts and uncles from both sides. But the couple continue living with their parents until their wedding reception, *aroosi*, which is the luxurious event everyone expects for the most longed-for couple in the Rustin dynasty, with the white wedding gown, decorations, stylish photos, and hundreds of guests. Though religiously allowed, culturally the bride and groom are expected not to consummate the marriage until after they move in together on their wedding night. A wedding date is set in a few months' time in the spring, hoping the nation's lost peace will be regained and people in a celebratory mood by then. With Soo out of the way, there is finally an end to her elders' concern about her future as well as Sara's.

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Soo and Rasool start spending more time together almost immediately following their engagement to get used to being more than cousins. Yet that hasn't stopped Soo from continuing her volunteer work, and although her elders are not thrilled about it, Rasool has been understanding. As there is now no religious restriction limiting their interactions with one another, Rasool keeps in close contact with her, hoping to bring Soo out of her bashful shell. He is also eager to make her fall in love with him before their wedding, and he sees no better means to that end

than providing for all that a new bride would want to have. He has reduced his work hours at The Rustins' Persian Rug Gallery, where he – alongside his father and brothers – runs the family business, and uses most of his time taking Soo out on dates and also shopping sprees almost every day to sweep her off her feet. Soo, however, would rather divert his attention to what she would love to do in life, rather than to have, with caring for those in need as her first and utmost priority.

Only four days into their life as a couple, and they are already on their third date. And as always, no date comes to a closure without a shopping phase of some sort. He always asks his driver to drop them off at various shopping areas of Tehran, where he would then show his prodigal nature to Soo by spending thousands of tomans lavishly on things they both know Soo doesn't need, nor does she care to have. He clearly states that he enjoys spoiling his wife, and that she deserves it. He then closes the subject with a long stare that makes her blush.

Today's pick is the city's great bazaar, *Bazaare Bozorg*, Tehran's most ancient market, where they stroll on foot through the crowded covered area, with a labourer carrying their shopping bags on a large trolley behind them. Next on their way, they come across a well-known passage for children's items and products, filled with shops that supply nursery furniture, children's clothing, and toys. Rasool's unexpected turn into that direction makes Soo nervous.

'Aren't they cute? I'd say let's buy the whole store,' he says with a smile as he stops at the very first shop.

Soo nearly trips over her veil but refuses to grab his hand as he tries to catch her.

'Are you okay?' he asks at the entrance to the store.

'Yes, but no.' She manages to keep her balance. 'We're not going in there. I thought we discussed —'

'I know, but you did agree to *one* biological child, didn't you?'

'But not right now, somewhere down the track, maybe years from now, unless we accidentally have one sooner than planned, which will then be a different story.'

‘Okay, but what if the lucky accident happens earlier than we thought it would,’ he says with a smirk and a wink.

Soo’s face falls, and she starts walking away.

Rasool follows her. ‘I’m so sorry. The last thing I want is to upset you or to make you think I’m ignoring your wishes. I promise that we will not be buying any baby stuff until you’re ready.’

After a risky way of testing the waters, he *does* keep his promise. While there is room for improvement, Rasool seems supportive enough to make her feel she has made the right choice comparatively. If only love would come along, life with him would be more than she could ask for.

## Chapter 6: Van Date

Soo and a few of her friends are coming back from a house in the neighbouring suburb, where they help out a childless eighty-year-old widow with her chores on a weekly basis. It is now about ten days after Soo's quiet marriage to Rasool, though they still won't start living together until their wedding celebration. The girls are busy talking about their greatly missed friend, Tahmineh, who has just recently had her wedding and started a new life with her husband in another city. A large military van is following the young girls, but they have nothing to worry about. They are not involved in political riots. Besides, the driver who is invisible behind the tinted windows, doesn't seem to be showing any interest in stopping and questioning them. Soo says goodbye to her friends at an intersection and follows a separate way, carrying a heavy bag of green herbs to be prepared in the Rustins' house for the widow. The van increases its speed and makes a heart-stopping turn in front of Soo at a corner of an alleyway, before coming to a sudden stop. A few passers-by give a frightened look at the military vehicle and run away.

As the driver gets out of the van, the leisurely days of Soo's life without Joe come to an end. He is wearing as disguise an anti-riot officer's uniform, a uniform too short and too tight for him, and nothing similar to the soldier's uniform he has to wear on the base. 'Hop in!' he says with a head gesture that nearly knocks off the cap that sits on top of his overgrown blond hair.

'God help me with you and this new show of yours! You know damn well I can't get in there.'

'There won't be any sinning involved. We've got other people on board and won't be alone,' he says, sliding the van door open.

Soo winces while taking a step back and covering her mouth. 'Oh dear God.'

Inside, there is a blindfolded young man, wrapped up in a blanket, tied up in ropes, and a wide duct tape on his mouth, struggling to free himself. Next to him sits a woman with a blond wig, in a much similar condition, but without a blanket, and wearing a white winter coat and black leather boots.

‘Allow me to introduce Ms Third-biggest Drug Dealer of the Shaapour area, as well as Mr Driver of this vehicle. Not to fret. She had it coming. I’ve been after her for a while, but this time I finally caught her red-handed,’ says Joe, reaching out inside the woman’s purse and showing Soo a plastic pack of drugs. ‘See? And as for him, I’m sure he’d rather be resting as he is now than chasing after rioters and endangering himself.’

Joe’s frenzied attempts at righting the wrongs and getting his way shock Soo.

‘You’re crazy.’ Soo starts running but not far, considering the weight of the herbs, and Joe chasing after her on foot.

He blocks her way with a naughty smile on his face. ‘A runner as always, huh? Do you still not trust me?’

She looks around through her sunglasses, desperate for any escape route.

‘Look, I’m sorry, and I promise that nothing bad will happen. And don’t bother asking people for help. In this uniform, they see me as a guard on duty. No one will come to your rescue. Just do as I say and get in there please. We need to talk.’

The displeased Soo complies. He closes the van door behind them. The place is dim with only a single window at the back, which is blocked out with paint for security.

Soo is now totally blinded and takes her sunglasses off. ‘What is the meaning of all this?’ She snaps at him. ‘Words cannot even begin to describe how much I resent what you’re doing.’

He turns the light on and puts his gun away, along with the cap. His thick wavy hair has grown surprisingly longer than expected in only three weeks since she last saw him. She lowers her gaze. There are no seats, but the floor is unexpectedly carpeted with a beautiful Persian rug, and the aroma of cooked food has filled the small atmosphere. He pulls away a *sofreh*, tablecloth, under which there are a few food containers piled up at the back corner.

‘It’s quite simple. This is the date you owed me. Since you cannot go on a date, the date has come to you. And no, I’ve never done this for any other girl, but

I've learnt it the hard way that with you, one must be willing to make a lot of compromises.'

Soo looks flabbergasted when she sees all the food, drinks and even desserts. She watches in amazement as he spreads the *sofreh* on the rug and sets it up nicely with cutlery, dishes, and all the food. 'And it is undeniably a religious and moral one. We are in the presence of these two people, who can't see you, nor can they identify you, and I've already taken an oath not to touch you. Oh, and cross my heart, there is no alcohol whatsoever in these drinks and no piggy-piggy oink-oink product in the food. Just sit back and dig in. It isn't exactly a restaurant, but my grandma's cooking is superb,' says Joe playfully, as he starts devouring large quantities of everything.

'Are you entirely out of your mind? Putting aside what you've done to these people, what about the fact that you've forced me into this, when I've repeatedly told you that I want absolutely nothing to do with you?'

'Would you just sit back? I had to talk to you, and you've been putting off hearing my proposal long enough, too long in fact that there are now *two* proposals.'

Soo sits but only behind the door and at an angle to him. 'I was stupid to believe that you had actually granted me my wish and left me alone.'

He looks affected by her quiet tears and moves away from the *sofreh*. 'Fine, I'll just get to the point ... I mean the points.' He reaches in the pocket of his own clothes which are piled up on the floor at a corner, and brings out what looks like a ring box, pink in colour, with golden edges and a small ribbon bow tie. He puts it on top of the dessert container. Soo gets short of breath, and while she swallows her fears down, thinking what this terrifying date could mean, he goes on to describe a family with a serious case of domestic violence against the wife and daughters, to the point of repeated hospitalisation.

'It's been on my agenda to stop this ruthless man, but this specific family happens to be strictly religious. The woman and her kids will most likely not cooperate with me or let me near them, so I need the assistance of a female partner, and that's where you come in. You have what it takes, plus you care

deeply about others. With your help, we'll hopefully rescue them and put an end to this wrong.'

'And if I don't accept?'

'Then I'll either leave them alone, or just do what needs to be done regardless. I'll await your answer by tonight.'

'Not that it is any of my business, but it isn't just their fear of you and avoiding you as an unrelated man. The problem is that no matter what you do to the perpetrator, the females have nowhere else to go. They will soon have to return to the same household and live with the same man.'

'So what? He'll be an entirely different and transformed man once I'm through with him.'

'Still, your direct handling of the women will give him more excuse to make life a living hell for them. Either saint or evil, no Muslim man wants the female members of his family in any contact with *namahrams*. His *aberu*, *namous*, name, and reputation will be at stake.'

'Then be my partner ... and not just this once. I can use someone like you for the rest of my life. You bridge a permanent gap no one else can. We have similar goals and dreams, and can do a lot together, a lot of good things and all by your standards, I promise.'

Soo is already shaking her head. 'I can't, and I'd really appreciate it if you just stay out of my life for good.'

'You still can't trust me, can you?'

'You're right, I can't. And yes, my friend told me everything about that date, after I unjustly criticised you at the Welfare – and I do sincerely apologise for my misjudgement of you. But you have to admit it is very difficult to take such sudden transformations in an individual as genuine and not just as part of a sham. Had we been different people – and I mean both inside and out – things wouldn't be so vague where trust is concerned. But we are who we are.'

'Then get to know me better. Give me more time to prove my real self to you.'

‘I can’t. And, it isn’t just the matter of trusting you, or even the bad blood between you and my father. It’s also my inability to trust myself with you. Having these encounters makes me a sinner and takes me further away from God’s proximity, which is the first and utmost priority to me. I can’t afford to lose all that I’ve worked so hard to gain if you keep showing up in my life. Your attributes and traits are all overwhelmingly attractive to women, and after all I am only a human. Besides, it is even more complicated and disgraceful now that I’m married and have to —’

‘You’re *what!*?’ Joe’s face falls.

She uncovers her left hand from under the veil to show him the ring on her finger.

He gets up looking devastated and paces the floor.

Soo continues, ‘I now have an obligation to stay faithful to my husband, and not just physically. Getting to know you better or even having these contacts with you would be the worst kind of fall for me as a married woman. I can’t be a wife to a man while I’m having thoughts about another.’

‘It’s your cousin, isn’t it? And I bet you only did it to escape the familial and social pressures.’ The vigorous force with which he lands the palms of his hands on the side wall of the van sets the whole vehicle quaking. The bottles of fruit punch and soda tip over, trickling the liquid all over the *sofreh*. ‘How on earth could you say yes to the same man you broke up with a while ago, and have been rejecting all your life? You certainly don’t love him, and he will definitely want many biological children from you. He is not going to respect any of your wishes.’

‘Excuse me?’ Soo looks shocked.

‘Yes, I *do* know your two reasons for rejecting all those suitors. Why do you think I accepted a date with that friend of yours in the first place? Once she got herself wasted, she revealed everything to me about you. And I believed every word, because it all made sense.’

‘My personal life is *my* business, and this conversation is over.’ She gets up, flushed, and tries to open the van door, but he stops the door from moving.

‘Not until I’m finished. Just because you think you overpower me, doesn’t mean you can overpower your cousin.’

His blue, enraged eyes are just as petrifying as they are loving. Soo lowers hers and moves away from him.

‘Unless he is infertile, no ordinary man would be so madly in love with his wife to sacrifice his selfish parenting desire and let her raise other people’s orphans without asking her to give him his own children. Are you really that stupid and naïve not to see men for what they really are?’

‘If you must know, he has made a promise to me and signed the pre-nup agreement, along with granting me the right of divorce.’

‘No matter what he has promised or signed, he is only waiting to get what he wants. Once that’s done, he’ll turn the tables on you and gain the upper hand to dominate you. It will all be about *his* wants, *his* desires, *his* decisions, not yours, just like it is in most other households, with only one difference. You are not an ordinary woman with normal aspirations and perspectives to tolerate such a marriage. And God knows you deserve better.’

There is only bitter silence for a while, along with the desperate moans of Joe’s other two detainees, soaked with the stream of drinks running under them.

‘There’s still time to undo this,’ he continues. ‘I’m sure you two haven’t become a real couple yet. Your family couldn’t have possibly had the dream wedding in such a short time, and besides, the news would be all over the neighbourhood. You can easily get a divorce. It might be seen as a taboo, but it won’t be a sin. With my support you can do anything you want in life if you just trust me and let me help you.’

‘No, with or without a wedding, I have made a decision, the best I could, and I am going to stick with it. Please understand and respect that.’

‘Watching someone ruin their future by making the biggest mistake of their lives is not something I take sitting down. It isn’t in my genes, especially when that someone is you.’

‘You want to help me? You can’t help but to be a saviour to the entire world? Then save me from the flames of hell. That’s the urgent rescue I

desperately need. God doesn't want me to live with a man, while living with the memories and thoughts of another.'

'Why does it have to be an either/or situation with you? You don't have to sin to have everything you want. Don't you think you deserve more, that it is possible to have both?' says Joe, coming towards her.

'I have to go now. Please let me leave.'

He picks up the ring box and lands his hands on the wall of the van again, this time with Soo in between his arms, yet without coming into contact with her. 'You did what you had to do considering the circumstances, all of which I'm aware of, and I don't blame you. But you have a much better option now.'

'Whatever it might be, I don't want to hear it. I now have a husband to whom I have a duty of honesty about everything, including this forbidden date with a *namahram*, which you forced upon me. And it sure won't be easy telling him about this. Please don't make it any harder.'

'What does he care, when he is the total winner – the lottery winner in fact – in all this? No matter what your pre-nup conditions are, he is going to have the most virtuous, generous, affectionate, and kind-hearted woman as his wife. He will have a true angel, who also happens to be the most indefinably stunning woman anyone has ever laid eyes on,' says Joe, only inches away from her, making her more uncomfortable by the minute. She has too little room to be able to put her sunglasses back on. 'So what if her conditions are odd and undoable to him? Once she is his, he can and *will* reverse everything, because when a girl with your religious and moral beliefs becomes a woman, the cultural pressures force her into a one-way street with no turning back.'

'This is truly torturous, and in many more ways than one,' says Soo, having hard time breathing, and blushing all over.

'The true torture is yet to come when you'll be handing yourself to a stranger you don't love on your wedding ni—'

'Stop it.'

He closes his eyes and sighs for a few seconds. 'You admitted having feelings for me, and let me tell you that they will only grow stronger. What's

more, you were waiting for true love, for a soulmate who could sweep you off your feet and want you for what you are, not what you look like.'

'I'll kill you, Tahmineh.' Soo curses her friend under her breath.

Joe continues, 'You longed for a special man who would support you in reaching your unconventional dreams, and definitely a man who wouldn't make you his baby-making machine. But now, what a waste of everything and what a pity! I'm not a man of letters like your father is, but it is situations like this, which brings to one's mind that famous poetic proverb by Mowlana:

*Ab dar koozeh o ma teshneh laban migardeem*

*Yar dar khaneh o ma gerde jahan migardeem*

*Water is inside the urn, and burning with thirst we search.*

*Lover is at home, and around the world we search.'*

His eyes are moving up and down her face, but he sighs again and looks away. 'It's time I came clean about my feelings for this one-and-only soul. Yes, as you had rightly guessed, my interest in her has never been merely professional, but I swear, neither has it ever intended to be maliciously advantageous. True, our two families are dissimilar where religiosity is concerned. On top of that, I've had my share of living a single's life, to the very extreme. But that era of my life came to an end when I found the one I was looking for. I can't change my family, but I've genuinely repented, and I'm never going back to that life again. And no, it isn't a strategic declaration to pretend I've become more compatible to her and her family's moral standards. She does to me what no alcohol or other women have ever done. And, I swear to the same God we both worship, that I'd rather die than let her go, or see her become someone else's wife.'

Soo closes her brown eyes, letting her tears roll down her long, wet lashes. 'Do you have any idea what you're doing to me? Way to go! So much for the promise you made not to hurt me!'

'Sorry, you're the last person I ...' He moves away from her, still holding the ring box, and runs his fingers through his hair and stubble. 'It isn't like me to get caught up in my emotions and go overboard like this.'

‘What you have in mind can’t possibly happen, even if I do get a divorce. And no, I’m not that superficial to have in my selection criteria a suitor’s familial background, or the way they have lived their personal life. No one can choose the family they’re born in, and as for their past, it is between them and God. And the God I know doesn’t judge people on the basis of their outer religiosity and observance of religious formalities and rituals, but by their inner character. The biggest issue for me here is trust, especially trusting someone who will always be considered the Rustin family’s nemesis.’

He has never looked more disappointed, yet his gaze is most admiring. ‘Okay. Leave before you make me any crazier,’ says Joe, opening the van door. ‘About that family ... I’ll suspend my plans until I hear from you.’

Soo heads home, running and crying all the way, having left behind the widow’s herbs near the van. She nevertheless makes a quick trip to the mosque first. The female religious scholar isn’t present, but a sheikh accepts to see her.

She briefly narrates the request of help that was put forward to her by a *namahram* to assist a family of females in crisis, and the dilemma she is now in because of her marital status, along with her inner feelings and challenges. The most important question is that considering the awkward situation she is in and the urgency, does she still need her husband’s permission if she is willing to accept the offer to help that family?

‘As you have rightly mentioned, according to sharia laws a husband’s consent is indispensable in most endeavours a wife is planning to undertake. However, if the deed is absolutely crucial in saving someone’s life or saving someone from serious harm, and if you have genuine doubts about your husband’s approval of the deed, then religion allows you to go ahead without discussing it with him or getting his permission. And even if the man requesting your assistance has personal interests in you, and you feel vulnerable around him and in danger of polluting your soul, in urgent situations you are again exempted from the obligation of getting your husband’s consent,’ says the sheikh to Soo, who has her veil all over her face to cover her identity from him. ‘In Islam it all comes down to the incentive and the motivation behind a deed, and from what I

understand you have no intention of sinning, and every intention of helping out that family.'

Soo returns home submerged in a world of anguished thoughts, bringing in with her the widow's bag of herbs from behind the house door, and only realising halfway into the terrace stairway what she is holding. 'I couldn't possibly be carrying this bag, unless it's been delivered here by ... him.'

She wishes she didn't have the religious duty to inform her husband about the surprise meeting with Joe, but luckily, dealing with Rasool isn't as hard as she anticipated. After much advance preparation and having Rasool take an oath on the holy Qur'an not to pressure her into a Q&A session, Soo brings the incident to Rasool's attention, but only in the most condensed form possible, and without naming anyone. All she divulges is that on her way back home, a man in a military guard's uniform blocked her way and asked her hand in marriage, but without any physical contact with her. The man then let her go, once she told him she was already married, and no one witnessed the incident except for his two blindfolded detainees.

Thinking the predator might be a member of the Shah's SAVAK, Rasool sees no possible way of catching the offender, so all he does is to ask her to stay indoors as much as possible. After all, what is done is done, and what is important is that she is his, and no one else's.

Could Rasool's reaction be any more like what Joe had pictured in her mind?

## Chapter 7: Domestic Violence

The following day at the break of dawn, after much prior arrangements, and not having slept a wink, Soo reaches a small intersection. She waits behind an electricity generator box, wearing the same masculine disguise as when she had gone to rescue Tahmineh, and carrying a light fabric backpack which contains her black veil.

‘Hey, girl.’ In only a few seconds Joe’s low and quiet voice turns her head back. ‘This way. And read this while we walk to the car.’ He hands her a letter.

‘I forgot to say thank you for delivering the herbs,’ says Soo.

‘I couldn’t disappoint an old widow just because you disappointed me,’ says Joe with an all-knowing yet sad look.

She follows him into a back alley. His letter reads:

*I would have gone through the instructions with you one more time orally, but since you have restrictions in speaking to men in private, I’ll only repeat a few essentials in writing and trust that you’ve understood the rest of the detailed plan we discussed over the phone. This is one of the simplest and safest operations, or I wouldn’t have involved you at all. However, there are three crucial things. First of all, you’re only here to deal with the females and only when I tell you to, and under no circumstances are you to meddle in any way with the men or do anything outside the plan. Secondly, I can’t emphasise enough the confidentiality of the operation, and that our identities must remain hidden from the public at all times. Lastly but most importantly, please press the green intercom button on the radio if you need me for any reason or just leave whenever you need to.*

‘Okay,’ she says, folding the letter, but Joe takes it from her, tears it into small bits, and throws it into a gutter at the side of the alley.

They reach a station wagon with tinted windows, parked among other cars on the side of an alley. After letting Soo into the car, where she will wait for his signal, he hands her the car keys, as well as a package, and a gun. He then swaps the licence plates of the vehicle, and after turning his two-sided, light-brown

jacket inside out, he puts his black balaclava on, and goes off to a house on the opposite side. Soo looks in amazement as he climbs up the three-metre front wall of the house using a rope, in a matter of seconds, as if done by a lizard. After carefully checking the surroundings, he notifies his partners via the radio. A pickup truck reverses near the house, and a couple of armed and muscular men, wearing similar black outfits to Joe's, jump off the truck quickly and noiselessly, one of them carrying a full sack on his shoulder. Joe lets them in through the front door and shuts the door behind them.

Soo is reflecting. 'Dear God, are these men perhaps ... the JANG?' she whispers.

A loud aggressive brawl is soon heard, intermingled with the fearful cries of women and children all from within the house. A few passers-by are attracted to the noise and are considering notifying the police. But some neighbours, who are looking out their windows, tell them not to. After all, this is a family matter, another usual case of husband beating his wife and children behind closed doors, and hence they should not interfere in people's private affairs.

Soo is disheartened and starts praying for the safety of all involved.

'Come in now.' Joe's voice comes through the intercom radio he has given her.

Soo puts on a balaclava and leaves the car in a flash.

The house is much bigger on the inside, and it is apparent that more than one family resides in the premises. In the front yard, Joe and his men have their hands full with handling the male occupants in a rough way.

'Upstairs, first door on the right,' says Joe.

Up the staircase, Soo knocks on the door, asking for permission to enter in her own female voice, but there is no answer. She explains that she is only there to help them with their crisis, and that no men will be in contact with them. Hearing no reply, and since the door is locked, Joe runs up momentarily and breaks the door open for Soo.

The mother and three girls look horrified, having gathered in a corner and covered themselves up with bedsheets.

‘*Ghahraman*, knight, saviour, or whoever these men might be, I swear if a *namahram* enters this room I’ll kill myself, and if I don’t, my husband will kill us all,’ says the woman, pointing a pair of scissors at herself. ‘We are a Muslim family with *namous* and *aberu*.’

Soo tries to calm her and her children down, while telling her the plan in a nutshell. They are reluctant and scared, but Soo finally convinces them to get dressed, and soon they follow her to the yard.

Joe has finished tying up a man with ropes, and is putting him inside a beige sack. His friend has sent the other women and children into the building, and their third partner is keeping three men at gunpoint, one of them in his eighties with all grey hair.

Joe faces the elderly man, while picking a few winter flowers from the flower bed. ‘We’ll be taking your no-good son, Hashem, with us. It’s time he had a taste of his own medicine and learned what beating really feels like. And it wouldn’t be fair to women and children to witness such a historic scene in this beautiful yard of yours, which by the way happens to have stunning flowers.’ He tapes the flowers behind the men’s ears.

Soo can’t keep a straight face and presses hard to keep her lips together. The little girl, youngest of the three, starts laughing. ‘He is so funny, Mum.’ But the woman pulls the girl under her veil to quieten her.

Joe continues, ‘Don’t you all look lovely now? However, if I find out that he has raised his hand against his family ever again, I’ll personally disable not only him but all of you for life, in which case none of you will look as pretty as you do now. And as for his family, my female partner will be in charge of them.’

Joe makes a gesture with his head at Soo.

She approaches the old man but keeps her eyes off the men. ‘I will be personally taking your daughter-in-law and granddaughters with me to a safe place until your son makes a genuine promise to start treating them well. And yes, I’m a woman, and I assure you that no man will come into contact with your females.’

Though the men have duct tape on their mouths, they look astounded to hear a woman's voice.

Soo stops at the door to put her own veil on. 'I wear the hijab too just like you do. This way no one outside will make rumours about you going into a car with an unrelated man,' she says to the women.

Joe's partners carry the sack containing Hashem to the truck outside, followed by Soo who leads the females into the station wagon while covering her fake beard and moustache with her veil. Joe is the last to leave, taking with him the rest of their tools in a bag. Some of the neighbours, who are still chatting at their windows, are dumbfounded to see the unexpected happen in front of their eyes, and their gossiping starts, even before the two mysterious vehicles take off.

Forty minutes later, after hearing the heartbreaking account of the woman's twenty-year marriage to her violent husband, Soo gets them to the address which was already determined by Joe when she called him last night to accept his request. She is to drop them off and hand them to his grandmother, Farah, who'll be either waiting for them in the house or will arrive there shortly after. Soo is then to park the car a few blocks away at another address and go home. But since no one answers the doorbell, Soo uses the keys Joe has given her and lets the females in.

The place is a vacant house, much newer from the inside than it looks from the outside, and only partly furnished with basic but modern furniture and essentials. There are some dry snacks and tea in the kitchen, but the refrigerator is empty and unplugged. It is evident that no one has lived there on a permanent basis, at least not for a while. Thinking of what awaits them at home upon their return, the guests have a hard time relaxing and winding down. Soo does her best to make them feel at home and assures them that their man will be a completely different one when they meet him again the following day.

A couple of hours later, although Soo is trying to hide her frustration and fear from the guests, who are already shaken as it is, Farah's absence is bringing about new concerns to Soo. She takes the radio out of her pocket several times but changes her mind just before pressing the green button. The doorbell finally rings.

‘Thank God.’ Breathing a sigh of relief Soo picks up her backpack and says a quick goodbye to the guests. Yet it is not Farah but Joe in ordinary clothes. The youngest guest, who’s around five, follows Soo to the door, leaning her head on Soo’s hip. Joe has his back to the house door, and is busy emptying a car stuffed up with groceries and houseware, some of which he has already placed behind the door.

‘No, I can’t come in, Gramma, so save it. And yes, I know the tall girl is out of this world but —’ He cuts himself short and looks frozen as he turns around with some of the stuff in his hands and finds Soo at the door. ‘Why haven’t you left yet? What happened?’

‘Your grandmother isn’t here, so I couldn’t leave them.’

‘What!? She said she’d be here,’ says he, bringing the rest of the shopping to the entrance in a hurry. ‘Where is the station wagon?’

‘I had to park in the alley back there behind that trailer,’ she says, making a head gesture.

‘These are some food, clothing, toiletry, bedsheets, and so on for the guests.’

‘All of these? They expect to be home by tomorrow, along with you-know-who,’ says Soo, looking at the girl from the corner of her eyes. ‘That was the deal and the only way they agreed to leave their house and come here with me.’ With a concerned look, she takes the bags inside the door.

‘Yeah, yeah. The jerk should be up and in a vertical position by tomorrow, once he is stitched and glued back up. And considering all your begging last night, I’ve gone easy on him. Don’t worry. I’ve made a beautiful man out of him, flowers and all, just like his dad and brothers,’ says Joe jokingly.

While Soo fights a smile, the little girl starts laughing.

‘I can’t come in. Could you bring me a phone? There is a spare handset in the kitchen.’

Soo looks around the yard, bewildered. ‘But there is no wall socket here.’

‘If you trusted me for once in your life, you’d know that impossibilities aren’t really that many.’

His insinuating comment, along with the sad stare, makes her uncomfortable. She goes in, looking perplexed and taking some of the shopping bags with her. He has already opened the phone fuse box near the outside door and is busy with the wiring, by the time she returns with the handset.

The little girl sits on the ground and gets busy eating some of the eatables Soo has brought out of the bags for her.

Within a minute Joe has made the call, which confirms that Farah is on her way. ‘She must be held up by the demonstrations,’ he says, hanging up. ‘Just stay a bit longer if you can. The woman and her kids will freak out to find themselves alone in a deserted strange place. And I will take care of the station wagon.’

Soo nods with her eyes on the ground, while bringing out from her backpack the package containing the car keys and the rest of the operation equipment, and places it behind the door, next to Joe.

‘Look, about what you did today for this family,’ he says, picking up the package and putting it inside his jacket. ‘I know you don’t want to hear any thanks or praise —’

‘No, I don’t, and I can’t,’ she interrupts him. ‘It is you and your team, who deserve all the credit.’ She covers the girl’s ears. ‘These women owe everything to the incredible JANG,’ she says quietly.

This time it is Joe who appears to be taken aback.

She continues, ‘Didn’t you think it would be too obvious for me now? In fact, you intentionally let this happen. That was the whole plan to not only rescue these poor women but also attract me to your team of gangsters. The name doesn’t mean war. It stands for Joe’s gang. Please don’t confirm it, because it needs to stay a secret, and I don’t want to have to lie about your identities, if one day I am put in a position where I have to protect you and your group. Let’s just leave this revelation as an assumption, a theory from my side. And thank you so much for saving Raheem Kabiri as well. I now realise why of all the prisoners, the

JANG decided to release him and his inmates.’ Soo takes her hands away from the child’s ears and gives her a kiss on the head.

‘That wasn’t their first operation of that type. The team’s ideology is that no one should be victimised in any way, especially not for their opinion. But yes, I admit, that specific job served a twofold objective, with a personal touch attached to it. It was either releasing him to buy you some more time or killing all your other suitors, so the team took the easy way out. But then, little did I know ...’ He sighs.

‘They will always be in my prayers for putting their lives at risk to save others. I can’t tell you how grateful I am to these heroes.’

‘Whether that gratefulness is enough to lead to trust is a different, personal aspect to what we did today. But looking at the professional side of it, what’s important is that you had the right to a first-hand experience of what living a life on the edge like theirs feels like, if you were to one day become —’

‘I have to go check on the guests.’ Soo holds the child’s hand to take her in.

Just then Farah shows up in a black veil and gives a hug to Joe from behind the door. She is a tall, big-built woman in her seventies, with the same fair complexion and blue eyes as Joe’s. ‘Forgive me, son. The main roads were blocked for miles and I —’

‘Never mind,’ Joe cuts her short. ‘The long narrative can wait.’

She brings his head down and plants a noisy kiss on his cheek. ‘You’ve become as kissable as a child without that horrible smell of alcohol. I am so thrilled and proud of you for sticking with your penitence. Here, this is a little gift, a tiny *mohr* and *tasbeeh*, for people on the go like you.’ She places them in his pocket. ‘I’ll also be checking your *namaaz* today to make sure you remember everything I taught you as a child and are doing your prayers correctly.’ But then all her attention seems to be diverted to the strange-looking Soo when she moves away from Joe and sees her and the child inside the yard.

‘*Salaam*,’ says Soo humbly, as their eyes meet.

‘*Salaam aleykom* dear.’ Just as Farah’s eyes moves up and down to figure out why a woman’s voice is coming through a male or a male look-alike figure, Joe tugs at Soo’s sleeve and takes her out of the house.

‘Not now, Gramma. She has to go.’

‘*She?* But —’

‘Later, Gramma! We’re all running late, and you’ve got guests waiting. I’ll be in touch,’ says Joe, closing the door on Farah’s face.

He turns to Soo. ‘If she gets to know you, I won’t have the end of it. And what good will it do now? She always had the best of dreams for the worst of grandsons,’ he says with a sigh. Soo puts her veil back on, and starts wiping the black stuff off her face with a damp cloth, as she heads in the opposite direction.

‘Wait!’ he says.

She looks reluctant but stops.

He locks up his car and comes towards her.

‘The station wagon is *that* way.’ She points at a place behind him.

‘Okay, I won’t follow you, and you’re not going to accept a ride from me either, are you, *Mrs Rustin?*’

Soo shakes her head.

‘Fine, then take these, and I’ll leave you alone.’

She raises her eyes just enough to see a bundle of small white cloths in a see-through plastic bag in his hand.

‘The specially formulated solution does wonders on black and oily stains, without harming the skin. I use these all the time. You’ll be ruining your face with other stuff,’ says Joe.

Soo leaves without a word. Although this can’t possibly be considered a present, she still doesn’t find it in herself to accept anything from an unrelated man, when there is obviously no emergency.

Yet, he doesn’t seem to give up. ‘Look, I’m not directly handing this bag to you. I’m leaving it right here for whoever might need it and pick it up. You never

know. There might be thousands of other girls who enjoy going under cars and drawing fake beards and moustaches on their faces.' His sarcastic playfulness continues while he puts the bag on a post-box near him and then goes back to his car.

The solution turns out to be just as he had described it, and the wipes work like magic on Soo's skin. Her face is literally spotless in a matter of seconds, even before she catches the bus and heads home.

## Chapter 8: Curfew

The government's enforced military curfew in Tehran from seven pm to seven am has had a devastating impact on people's lives for the past ten days. For Soo it has brought increasing objections from her family to her charity and volunteer work. Before, it was mainly their concern about her lack of focus and attentiveness to her future married life and husband. Now, it is also the life-threatening circumstances outside home. Besides, the curfew has decreased Soo and Rasool's outings in the afternoons, since they cannot risk not making it back home on time. As such, Soo's family is even more adamant to keep her at home and available for her husband, who as their beloved son-in-law is now a regular at his uncle's house, hoping for as much quality time as he can get with his wife.

Today, however, due to a record-breaking shortage of staff at the Welfare, Soo is again in high demand, and she has managed to coax her elders into letting her leave home. But that is not all. Not only is she not home when Rasool arrives around midday, she is also late returning. It is almost six pm, and her worried father and husband are left with no option but to go after her before the curfew starts.

They reach the main entrance to the Welfare at the front, which is a wide iron gate where a guard controls the arrivals. Having been notified, Soo comes to meet her men but seems to have no intention of leaving with them. She apologises for not being able to call them. Having her hands full with the kids, she had asked the manager to get in touch with her family but has just been informed that due to the line interruptions the Rustins couldn't be contacted. She asks permission to spend the night there to take care of the children. There are apparently only a handful of carers for a few hundred children. Moreover, the increasing protests and the gunshots after the curfew are terrifying the kids, causing an uncontrollable disorder at late hours of night, and hence, requiring more carer attendance. Ebrahim and Rasool are enraged at her request and determined to take her home.

'Over my dead body you're spending the night in this place,' says Ebrahim, while Rasool paces the ground with his hands on his head. 'For God's sake, you're a young woman. Have you lost your mind and manners? Since when have

you ever slept anywhere other than your father's or your uncle's home? What will people say? How can you endanger yourself and our *aberi* like this?'

A large black van pulls over to the side of the Welfare building near the entrance where Soo and the Rustin men are in a heated argument. Following the van is an oversized, awkward-looking motorcycle whose driver takes his helmet off even before coming to a full stop behind the van. It is Joe, and his presence makes Soo panic, but she keeps her eyes on her father. While the irritated Ebrahim continues with his much-expected preaching, Joe unloads a large bundle of stuff from the van and carries it towards the entrance. Soo and her men move out of his way as he passes them by, with a glance at all three. Although Joe and Ebrahim have never actually met before, despite that momentous incident ten years ago, seeing the two so physically close is enough to give Soo goose bumps and make her stutter.

Ebrahim narrows his eyes. 'You're not even making any sense anymore. You're losing your mind over these kids, girl. Now for the last time —'

'Besides, you look exhausted, and you probably haven't eaten for hours, considering the circumstances of this madhouse. You need to go home and get some rest,' says Rasool.

Soo notices again Joe's going back to the van and this time making a hand gesture to a group of women of different ages, wearing different types of clothing, to get off the van, along with the van driver. The two men guide the women towards the gate, while Joe hands each woman a green one-thousand-toman note. The actions catch all three Rustins' attention, and they stop their argument momentarily.

Joe goes inside the Welfare building.

The driver, however, faces the women and asks them to stay where they are until called inside. 'I understand that some of you are here against your will and see my friend as a ... well as an SOB basically, but remember that this is for a good cause, and he'll be checking up on you.'

The Rustins exchange a look, and Soo continues, 'Dad, please. Some kids are probably poking or gouging each other's eyes out right now as we speak.' She emphasises that it is a safe and friendly environment with mostly female staff and

only a few old men, and that she'll be back home after the curfew ends tomorrow morning.

'Absolutely not.' Ebrahim explains that the orphans' situation won't get any better in the following days as the whole country is in turmoil. Half of Tehran's population has already evacuated the city and the rest are on their way out to be out of danger, while she is deliberately putting herself in danger. He doesn't want to sound selfish and uncaring, but she has done all that she could and much, much more than expected, and so has the Rustin family.

'*Amoo* is right,' says Rasool, backing up his uncle. He too goes on reminding her of the numerous times they have financially helped the orphanage as well as by goods and other donations. He says that although they are sorry for these children, they can't let her endanger her life and dignity. Their first duty is to protect her. It is the government, ministry and council's responsibility to take care of these children, not hers. 'Please hurry up before it's too late.'

'See! It isn't just me whose orders you're disobeying,' says Ebrahim. 'It is *haraam* for a married woman to spend a night where her husband doesn't allow her to be.'

The manager's cheerful voice, greeting and welcoming the women at the entrance, interrupts the Rustins. Once the women enter the building, the van driver leaves and the manager faces the Rustins. 'Mr Rustin. Take your daughter with you, sir. We just received ten new carers. Miss Rustin, please go home and rest assured that the children will be alright, at least for tonight, thanks to our Mr Engineer. I called him an hour ago at a moment of complete hopelessness, and he has miraculously answered our cries with new workers.'

'*Khodaro shokr*, thank God,' says Soo.

With the problem temporarily solved, Soo heads inside for a short minute to grab her purse. On her way back, Joe is awaiting her down the stairs. 'You should know that although I had seen your father around in your old neighbourhood, we hadn't actually met, so there is no need to stress. He doesn't know I am the unmentionable.'

She nods. 'Thank you.'

‘And take these.’ He brings out a couple of small guns. Soo winces and moves back. ‘You’ll need them. You won’t make it back home on time.’

She shakes her head and runs out.

‘Damn it. Just what I need right now,’ murmurs Joe, disfiguring the barrel-shaped metal garbage can with a hefty kick to its side.

As the three Rustins head back home in a hurry, Ebrahim still looks angry yet thankful to God that a semi-miracle made his rebellious daughter change her mind. ‘Quite a young man, I mean the engineer! Thank God, he showed up with the women when he did. I can’t even begin to tell you how upset I was – still am – and what I’d have done if you had disobeyed us. Who is he anyway?’

Soo’s temperature rises instantly, making her blush. She nearly trips over her veil.

‘Careful, are you okay?’ says Rasool, trying to catch her, but she dodges him.

‘Do you know him?’ Ebrahim continues.

She takes a while to answer. ‘Dad, do I look like I socialise with men or know their personal details?’

‘No, but since the manager was so fond of him, I thought you might have heard.’

‘They just call him Mr Engineer.’

‘I see. He seemed to be one of the regular helpers and donors.’

‘Regular or not, they say he is the one who repaired the heating and did all those changes I told you about, and all for free.’

‘Really? What a noble young man! May God bless him!’

‘Oh, please, *Amoo Jaan*, dear uncle,’ says Rasool. ‘Didn’t you hear the way he had used force in bringing those random women there against their will? What would we do and how would we feel if, God forbid, any one of our women had been treated like that?’

‘You’ve got a point, but then how else could he have brought those women on such short notice?’ says Ebrahim. ‘Doing something wrong for the right reason is religiously allowed, if it is done to prevent something worse from happening. Besides he paid them generously. I’d say in his own unconventional and unique way he did the best possible.’

There is a flood of demonstrators up on the main road heading their way from the opposite direction, and luckily bringing a sudden close to the subject.

‘We need to take the back streets, *Amoo*,’ says Rasool. ‘There’s no way we can pass through the crowd. It would take us ages.’

Yet, the back streets are not much different. They keep turning to smaller alleys that lead them nowhere near home. It is now seven pm, and the shooting of whoever has dared to stay outside starts.

‘Help us! Please open up!’ Ebrahim bangs on a few house doors.

‘We’re just ordinary civilians stuck in traffic and can’t make it home!’ shouts Rasool, going door to door.

But even those residents who care to reply don’t open up. They either don’t trust the outsiders or are too scared of the guards, who will most likely take their action as providing refuge for the opponents of monarchy. The Rustins keep running to whichever direction they assume will lead them home fastest, and nonetheless giving the least value to the suggestions of the one companion who knows the streets around the Welfare best, and who is constantly being blamed for putting them in this predicament.

A khaki army personnel carrier containing a few guards is coming their way. ‘*Eist*, stop!’

The Rustins try to make a left turn at the next alleyway to be out of sight, while keeping as close as they can to the tall walls of the houses. A series of gunshots are fired. They manage to make it to the other alley safely. Ebrahim is out of breath, but not merely because of the running. The frightening situation has ignited a panic and asthma attack, making him fall on his knees.

‘Dad! Oh my God,’ screams Soo.

The military carrier catches up and tries to turn into the same alley but, too big to find its way through, it comes to a halt at the entrance, dropping off a few guards who aim at the Rustins and start firing again. Soo and Rasool pull Ebrahim behind a parked car, which is parked parallel to the tall walls of a house, while Rasool bombards Soo with all the reprimands in the book. Ebrahim asks them to leave him there and run, something they all know they won't do. Their attempts at asking for help from the houses nearby are just as futile as before. They crawl under the car, which gets a few bullets and a flat tire as a result. Soo brings out a knife she always carries in her purse. They start saying the well-known prayers, pleading to God for an urgent rescue from the hardship, '*Amman yojeebol moztarra eza da'a va yakshefos soo'a?* Is there any listener who answers the cries of prayers at times of distress and disaster, and removes the adversity?'

Built into the wall next to the car, Soo spots an old, rusty ventilation window with a metal frame all covered with a mixture of thick dust, paint, and bird droppings. Her spontaneous forceful kick knocks the whole thing down and into the dark basement behind the wall, making an opening wide enough for them to pass through. While Ebrahim is in no condition to object or scold, Rasool starts another more severe round of reprimands, questioning Soo's moral standards and pointing out the hazards involved in her unorthodox decisions and deeds, such as the height of the basement, what might be under her feet, and what they might face down there. Soo, however, has already crawled into the opening, feet first, while facing Rasool and her father.

'In life-and-death situations people take action, not blame and argue. I'd rather we get broken bones and bruises than get killed.'

'Haven't you acted insane enough for one day?' Rasool continues to yell.

'Hurry!' she says, scraping and thrusting with her knife at the wall to make more room around the opening. 'This is big enough. Once I'm down there, send him in but hold his hands tightly until I catch him.'

'Enough, already,' Rasool snaps at her.

Other gunshots are heard from a different direction, and the guards fall on the ground howling in pain just before reaching the Rustins. However, new guards get off the carrier truck and come their way. An armed man wearing a

black balaclava and dark sunglasses appears from the opposite side of the alley. There is now shooting from both sides and the gunfire sounds commingle with Soo's cries, as she begs Rasool to comply with her request. The masked man disarms the wounded guards and comes towards the Rustins.

'We're innocent passers-by and have got nothing to do with any political parties, nor the monarchy,' yells Rasool.

'Stay away from my daughter,' says Ebrahim, wheezing and pointing Soo's knife at the man while pulling himself near Soo. 'Fear God and have mercy, whoever you are.' He then faces Soo with his most serious look. 'Go inside now. Whatever happens to us, you save yourself. Do you hear me, girl?'

Soo jumps into the basement and is out of sight.

The man, whose identity is known to only one of the Rustins, kicks open the house door next to the parked car. 'Get in there, now,' he yells.

The Rustin men are petrified.

'Now, I said. Quick! More guards are on their way,' continues Joe.

Ebrahim and Rasool crawl out and go in. While Joe continues to fire the machine gun in his hand, he looks under the car and notices the opening on the wall, but sees no sign of Soo. He smashes the car window, shifts the gear to neutral, and as Ebrahim and Rasool watch everything in fear and amazement, he pushes the car back for about a metre, just enough to block the opening with the front wheel. He then follows the Rustins and closes the broken door behind them.

'Who are you? What do you want from us?' asks Rasool.

'Get in the yard and away from the door,' says Joe, securing the broken door by placing a piece of timber behind it.

They enter the yard, while Ebrahim's arm is around Rasool's neck.

'Forgive us, God, for barging into someone's home,' says Rasool.

'Go after her, Rasool. Go find Soo,' says Ebrahim.

Joe is already dashing down the basement stairway. Halfway down, he finds Soo on her way up with a dusty veil which is torn in a few places. Yet from the way she is running it is obvious she is not injured. The two share a quick look.

‘Thanks for coming to our rescue,’ says Soo, loud enough to be heard only by the intended addressee.

As Soo rushes to her father, the angry house-owner shows up full of resentment for their unlawful break-in.

Rasool does a quick apology to justify what’s been done. ‘We’re not the type of people to be trespassing or damaging other people’s property or belongings. And we will pay for all the damage my wife has caused to your basement window but —’

‘And a few jars of pickles I accidentally landed on. Sorry,’ adds Soo, settling her father down.

Rasool continues, ‘Believe me it wasn’t my idea. She acted impulsively out of desperation. As for this gentleman and what he has done, we don’t know who he is or where he has come from.’

Joe points his index finger at the house-owner. ‘No matter what she and I have done to your house and belongings, you will be hospitable to these temporary guests.’

The threatened house-owner takes a step back. ‘You don’t look anything like ordinary people. Who are *you*?’

‘He is pretending to be one of the JANG. The real ones are warriors,’ says a boy around twelve, one of the three children watching the scene from the upstairs’ balcony. But by their father’s order, especially when he takes one of his slippers off to throw at them, they all run back inside a room on the second floor. The owner’s wife also tells her husband off for being disrespectful to the unfortunate passers-by.

‘We’re grateful to all of you, but we can’t stay here,’ says Soo, while laying Ebrahim down on the ground.

‘The owners just said they are okay with it. You step outside that door, you’ll get killed,’ says Joe.

‘He needs his asthma medication,’ says Rasool.

‘Well check his pockets,’ says Joe.

‘He doesn’t carry it with him. He’ll get worse to the point of suffocation if we don’t get him home on time, thanks to his extra-charitable daughter who has shocked us by her inappropriate and unladylike deeds today,’ says Rasool with a glare of disapproval at Soo.

‘If I hear you blame —’

‘He only gets like this occasionally when he is thrown into panic over terrifying situations.’ Soo cuts Joe short, lest his hatred of Rasool leads to risky revelations.

Joe places his guns down and squats in front of Ebrahim. ‘You’re out of the danger zone. No one will hurt you or your family. And as for me, I don’t just go out opening fire on innocent people.’

‘Then why do you hide your identity under that harrowing mask?’ asks Rasool.

‘I have my reasons,’ he says, handing one of his guns to Rasool in a rough way.

‘What!?’ Rasool gasps. ‘No. I can’t. It’s illegal to use or even carry these.’

‘And one for your wife,’ says Joe, dropping a gun on Soo’s lap as well. ‘You’re right. By the looks of it, this unladylike lady is the manlier of the two of you.’

Rasool gives Joe a black look.

Joe continues, ‘Keep these just in case, and don’t hesitate to pull the trigger if this nice host becomes anything less than nice in my absence.’ He gets up. ‘What’s your home address?’

In a hardly audible voice, gasping for air and looking worse by the minute, Ebrahim expresses negation and dislike toward what Joe is suggesting. It is too dangerous outside and he’d rather die than become the cause of any harm to others.

Yet Joe prefers not to act upon his prior knowledge of their address, and thus reminds them that he doesn’t repeat himself, and asks for the address again in a serious tone of voice.

‘It’s number eleven Azadi Street. Couple of blocks north of ...’

Joe is out of the house, asking the owner to secure the door behind him, before Rasool can finish giving directions, and gunshots start immediately after his departure.

Soo covers her face and begins to cry, ‘Dear God. I’ll never forgive myself if ...’

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Around eight am the following day, having spent the night at the same house, the three Rustins return home safely and put an end to their family’s most anguished night. There is already a bed made on the living room floor, where Khanom Jaan immediately sends Ebrahim, as if handling a newborn just brought home from hospital. As expected, Soo receives the third degree and maximum amount of reprimand for this havoc. The rest of the day is spent re-telling the incident in detail, doing special prayers, thanking God for the wellbeing of all three, forbidding Soo from stepping into the Welfare ever again, and praising the unknown hero and worrying about his wellbeing.

‘Only God knows what we went through until that saviour rang the doorbell. May God be his guardian always,’ says Khanom Jaan, sitting next to Ebrahim’s bed and using some Vicks Vapour Rub on his throat and chest.

‘We knew you all had keys, so our first guess was that someone needed a temporary shelter from the guards,’ says Sara.

‘I sent Salman to the door, and Shireen followed him,’ Khanom Jaan continues.

‘Yes, when I asked who it was,’ says Salman, ‘he said he was only a helper and told me not to open the door, worried that his balaclava might frighten us. He said he had come to take Mr Ebrahim Rustin’s asthma medication to him.’

‘As we started panicking and I nearly fainted,’ continues Shireen, ‘he reassured us that you were all in a safe home in the neighbourhood and only needed the meds. We had no reason not to believe him. I quickly got your medicine bag, and Salman passed it on to him. That’s when we realised he was

injured, but we honestly couldn't do anything for him. He disappeared in seconds.'

'When I opened the door just a crack to hand him the medicine bag, I got a glimpse of a huge warrior like one of the JANG —'

'Would you stop your imaginary nonsense about the JANG for once in your life and get to the point,' Ebrahim snaps at Salman.

'Sorry. His right sleeve was soaked in blood. He got the bag and took off instantly, only telling me to shut the door.'

'God knows what might have happened to us had he not been there. We owe him our lives,' says Ebrahim. 'I want all of us to spend the day praying for his recovery. I hope to God nothing happened to him, and I will do all I can to find out who he is.'

Soo starts coughing. She nearly chokes on her saliva hearing her father's last sentence.

'Good luck with that, Dad. If he *is* one of the ... you'll be looking for a needle in a haystack,' says Salman, who receives a frightful glare from his father and grandmother.

But for Soo it isn't only Joe's wellbeing. She has something just as serious to ask the Almighty. Her feelings for Joe have become much too inevitable and strong to be considered anything but love, a dreadful discovery which according to her beliefs cannot be downgraded to any less impiety than a great sin, particularly for a married woman. She weeps for hours day and night, reading and repeating all the mantras she can think of, and doing all sorts of prayers in hope of penitence for the loss of her spiritual purity, and loathes her lack of control over her feelings for him. How and if she will ever be able to purify herself from this emotional uncleanness is a tribulation on its own. And her elders' recently enforced limitations are not making it any easier for her, as she can no longer reach God's proximity by doing any charity work for His servants. She resorts to fasting from dawn to dusk, just like it is done in Ramazan. She takes an oath not to miss a day of fasting until God resolves this adversity, and shows her a sign, which would ascertain to her that she has been cleansed of the sins and forgiven.

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The following day, when Ebrahim feels well enough to leave the house after the terrifying incident, he is off to find the unidentified man. Until there is an update on Joe's injury, Soo's only consolation is remembering what Mr Saltman told her when they took Joe to the hospital ten years ago: 'Don't you worry, miss! The menace I know has not just one but a thousand lives. He'll be alright.' In spite of the fact that none of the Rustins is more aware of Joe's level of strength and resilience than Soo is, she is the most worried of all about him and desperate to find out how he is doing. Yet to keep Joe's identity hidden, she tries to change her father's mind. Her attempts, however, are to no avail.

Ebrahim first stops by at the same house where they spent the night, to pay for the damages caused by their unauthorised entry, also carrying with him some homemade sweets as a thankyou gift for the host. He finds the house door and the basement ventilation already replaced, but the car isn't there, and the owner isn't home. The housewife tells him that a couple of other men, who didn't look or sound like the masked man, came the day before and took care of everything, including the car which is now being repaired at their local repair shop. She doesn't know the men's identity, nor has she seen the same masked man again. She only gives a rough description of their looks and physical appearance.

Ebrahim heads to the repair shop but can't get the information he needs out of the shop owner either. All he knows is that a couple of strangers who refused to give their names and contact details brought in a car to be fixed, and all was paid in cash in advance. Ebrahim looks disappointed, but as he leaves the shop a boy around twenty wearing black-stained clothes comes running after him. He is Javad, one of the former students at the high school where Ebrahim teaches Persian literature. They greet each other warmly. He says he works as an apprentice in that repair shop and couldn't help overhearing what he and his boss discussed. 'Yesterday after those two men left the damaged car at our shop, they got on a motorbike with this licence plate number.' He hands Ebrahim a piece of paper. 'I'm pretty sure I remember it correctly. I thought it might help you.'

‘God willing it will, and I can’t thank you enough. You were always flawless in memorising the poems I assigned for the class, so I have no reason to doubt your memory, son.’

Ebrahim puts some folded cash in Javad’s shirt pocket as gratuity, which he is reluctant to accept at first, but after some *ta’arofing* he finally does.

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It takes Ebrahim two days going through various channels and parties to eventually obtain the details of the motorbike owner. He takes a taxi to an address outside the city. After finding his way among a few trailer trucks and lorries parked at the front, he reaches a vast warehouse adjacent to a wholesale supplier of spare parts for heavy motor vehicles. There are some stocky and muscular men in their twenties and thirties, one on the phone at the front reception and the rest busy in a back area, where large piles of tyres of different sizes and spare parts are stacked up to the ceiling. The man at the reception, with a shaved head and greenish black tattoos on his arms, hangs up to attend to the new comer.

‘What can I do for you?’ he says, looking Ebrahim up and down. ‘You certainly don’t look like a truckie.’

Ebrahim introduces himself and says he is there to see Mr Manoochehr Sarmad. But as soon as he gives an account of why he is there and how he has found out the address to the place, the man’s complexion changes and signs of suspicion and discomfort appear on his face. Ebrahim further emphasises his good intention.

‘Excuse me!’ The man goes to the back area that leads to the warehouse, and returns with a man, tall with a dark complexion, a black ponytail, and at least ten rings of assorted colours on his fingers. His physical features fit the description of one of the two men described to Ebrahim before. However, much to Ebrahim’s dismay, the man doesn’t help him with his inquiry, nor does he accept the money Ebrahim has brought to reimburse him for the cost of the damages. He only politely asks Ebrahim to leave.

Ebrahim looks frustrated but doesn’t seem ready to give up. A customer arrives inside the reception, interrupting the quiet argument, and Ebrahim takes a

seat. 'I'll wait right here until you serve your customer, but I'm not leaving.' As the man with the shaved head gets busy with the new customer, Manoochehr grabs a bottle of beer and goes into a room at the side of the reception and makes a call, after shutting the door behind him.

'Hey, Joe. It's Manooch,' he says quietly on the phone. 'Look, there is a Mr Rustin, Ebrahim Rustin, a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair, medium build and height, desperately looking for you ... Apparently he's got the address from the repair shop, where we took that damaged car a few days ago. He says he is seriously worried about your injury and is also determined to thank you in person for saving him and his family, and wants to pay you back. We've been trying to send him away, but he is not taking no for an answer. He doesn't look like a trouble-maker. But anyway, what do you want us to do with him?'

He pours half the beer down his throat while listening carefully.

'You what!?' He nearly chokes and spits some of the liquor out. 'You don't sound drunk, so are you totally out of your mind? What on earth is the matter with you these days, man? One wrong move and he can blow our cover ... Fine, if you accept the responsibility who am I to object? It's your team, your call. Later, dude!'

Manoochehr hangs up looking dumbfounded and goes back to the reception. 'Mr Rustin, if you believe that by waiting here a miracle of some sort will happen, who knows, in your case, it just might. Let me get you something to drink while you wait,' he says, taking out a couple of beer bottles from a small fridge and heading towards Ebrahim.

His friend fetches the bottles from him with a sneer. 'Seriously? Does he look like a drinker, you moron?' he whispers.

'Sorry. I'll just get you some tea.'

Not long after, a car stops by, and the driver comes in looking for a Mr Rustin, saying he is sent there to take him to where he can meet the person he is looking for. Ebrahim gets on board happily, and in half an hour he is dropped off in front of an engineering firm in the city.

‘This is it, sir. Mr Yousef Raad is waiting for you in room 401 on the fourth floor. His secretary will guide you in. And this is his business card.’ The driver hands Ebrahim the card.

The name doesn’t ring a bell since Joe’s full name was unknown to people ten years ago in Ebrahim’s old neighbourhood. Ebrahim thanks him while bringing out some cash, but the driver says that these are free services among friends. Once he leaves, Ebrahim goes to the nearby shops to buy some pastry and flowers for the injured rescuer.

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Whilst that is taking place outside, inside room 401 of the firm there are heaps of blueprints scattered all over a huge desk, behind which Joe is sitting while staring out the window, and listening – with obvious impatience and boredom – to his three clients. He seems fed up and finally cuts in by informing his clients of his fee for the proposed project. They don’t seem to believe their ears. A gentle knock interrupts them. Joe springs out of his armchair and to the door.

‘Your visitor, Mr Rustin, has just arrived,’ says the secretary, with Ebrahim standing behind him at a distance.

‘*Salaam*, Mr Rustin! Come in,’ says Joe.

Ebrahim narrows his eyes as he approaches Joe, looking lost and bewildered. ‘*Salaam*,’ he says, staring at the big bandage on Joe’s right arm. ‘You’re Mr Yousef Raad? *You* are the masked man? You certainly sound like him. But I know you.’ Ebrahim’s face lights up.

‘I hear you were eager to see me,’ says Joe, opening the door wide and inviting him to his office with a hand gesture.

Only after entering the office does Ebrahim realise the presence of the engineer’s clients. ‘Oh, sorry.’ He greets the men with polite bowing. ‘I wasn’t told you had company. I’ll just wait outside till —’

‘No, please have a seat. These gentlemen and I are almost done anyway,’ says Joe, guiding him to a sofa at the other side. ‘I’ll be with you in no later than

one minute.' He looks at his watch, while going back to the men with a wide-eyed insinuating glare.

His clients exchange glances. 'With all due respect, Mr Raad, this rate is utterly outrageous,' says one of the clients. 'Even your own partners can do the job for less than half the —'

'There is a reason why you're in my office and not in theirs. You're after quality as well as speed, and unfortunately the only one who can provide that kind of work is the bast—' he pauses, 'is the man you're looking at.' He attunes his wording, mindful of the special guest, as he gathers the paperwork off his desk.

Feeling the tension in the awkward situation, Ebrahim looks away and gets busy with the compact Qur'an he brings out of his coat pocket, along with his reading glasses.

'Mr Raad, perhaps we can negotiate, sir,' says the other client.

'As you can see, I've got an important visitor to speak to.' Joe sneers at them, throwing a copy of the contract to each man. They wince, looking offended. 'Either sign these at the bottom and leave, or take your business somewhere else. Either way, you're leaving.'

'But we haven't even discussed the details of —'

'I never discuss any details as I'm sure you're told. You'll just have to trust me on those,' he says with a mocking grin.

The clients exchange a stunned look and take a few seconds to have a quiet consultation with one another. Joe opens the office door waiting for them to leave, and they do so after signing the contract and giving him one last aggrieved look.

Ebrahim is no less stunned by what he has witnessed happen. He gets up as Joe closes the door behind the men.

'The worst part of my job is dealing with clients like these. Close-fisted, stingy millionaires,' says Joe, walking toward the sofa. 'Sorry about that.'

'I remember now. You are that benevolent engineer who, as I heard and saw, has been doing all that noble work for the Welfare. Why didn't you say it was you when you rescued us that night? Being a true hero, a saviour, and a

generous one too are attributes to be proud of. Why would you hide such qualities behind a mask?’

‘Look, as I said I have my —’

‘Reasons, of course. So sorry! I’m not here to interrogate you in any way. I’m just as overwhelmed as I am thrilled to find you.’

‘You didn’t have to bring all these. I hardly qualify as a sick in bed ... ever,’ says Joe, sitting on the other end of the sofa, noticing the pastry boxes and the flowers Ebrahim has placed on the coffee table.

‘True, but any other person would be in sickbed. And since when do we visit the sick empty-handed, especially one who nearly lost his life to save ours? In fact, I’ve come here to further thank you for what you did and check up on you. I also need to reimburse you for the payment of those damages you covered on our behalf.’

‘Don’t worry about that.’

‘Now to start with the most important part of this visit, tell me how you are. We were all extremely worried to see you bleeding like that when you brought my medicine and then disappeared into that frightening night.’

‘It’s nothing, and I’m fine.’ He raises his arm and moves it around. ‘I’ve had much worse injuries.’

‘*Alhamdo lillah!* Thank God!’

Joe opens one of the pastry boxes and puts it in front of the guest, followed by a tea tray brought in by the firm’s *abdarchi*, tea-man.

‘Putting aside the monetary aspect of this visit – and I’m hoping that you do tell me how much you paid for the repair of those damages without *ta’arofing* – we owe you our lives, and I’m here to see if there is anything I can do in return. I’m religiously and morally obliged to try my best to do something in return for what you did for us, although nothing I do will be of equal value.’

‘You owe me nothing. Your daughter saved herself and could have saved you too if only ... anyway. And as for me, that’s just a way of life I’ve chosen and am used to.’

‘I understand and respect that. I also realise that people who have the slightest expectation of a return from others wouldn’t be hiding their identity, but please I insist.’

Ebrahim brings out a bundle of cash, but Joe refuses to take any. He further emphasises his and his family’s eagerness to get to know the Raads and hopefully start socialising and having family relations with them. He in fact invites the engineer and his household to Soo’s upcoming wedding, saying he’ll receive an invitation card once they are sent out.

Joe looks hesitant and declares that he comes from a non-practising Muslim family totally incompatible with theirs – except of course his grandmother who is nearly immaculate in following the Islamic dos and don’ts and has been telling him about them all his life. ‘I wouldn’t be involving our families until you know who I am.’

Ebrahim says he knows him enough and his religiousness or lack of religiousness is no one else’s business. There is no pressure or obligation in religion, and faiths and beliefs are personal choices between people and the unseen. ‘It’s the character, the personality which makes individuals who and what they are, and yours outshines as one in a billion.’

‘You wouldn’t be saying that if —’

‘Please don’t make me return home empty-handed. I have an elderly mother who’ll be heartbroken if I don’t get anything out of this visit, not to mention my son, who is so much into knights and warriors.’

Joe takes a deep breath, pressing his head against the headrest of the sofa, his hands clasped behind his neck. ‘Fine, if you insist, putting aside the family gatherings for now, I can think of two things I am dying to see happen and you’re the key to both. But since the second is a prerequisite to the first, I’ll just mention the second for now. Still, I really doubt you’ll be as willing as you want —’

‘Try me, son. I wouldn’t be alive talking to you right now if it weren’t for you. Moreover, I am a man of my word and would like to keep it that way for the rest of my life.’ To prevent further *ta’arofing*, he starts writing a blank cheque.

‘Mr Rustin – and I’m not cashing that – do you believe that people have this dynamic ability to change, and that sometimes misunderstandings and misinterpretations can make people misjudge others, to the point of hating them and considering them as their enemies?’

Ebrahim reflects while leaving the cheque on the coffee table and putting back his chequebook and pen in his coat pocket. ‘Sure.’ He illustrates his confirmation by stating that Muslims in fact have a very good example of this. It happened to Imam Hossein and his holy household who were wrongly misjudged by other so-called Muslims, and ended up getting killed by them in coldblood. He then tells the story of Horr who used to be one of the imam’s worst enemies but ended up becoming such a devout companion of his that he became one of the first to fight in the imam’s army and become a *shaheed*, martyr, on the historic day of Ashura in Karbala.

‘So you agree with Imam Hossein’s ideology and approve of his forgiving the new modified Horr, even though he used to be the imam’s enemy?’ asks Joe.

‘Of course. I admit forgiveness is a complex undertaking, and I am not sure if I can ever be generous enough to do the same. Yet, all our prophets and imams are our exemplar for righteous deeds.’

‘But, you’d be willing to forgive your enemy if you found out one day that the whole enmity has been based on a misjudgement and a baseless misinterpretation, right?’

‘Mr Raad, I don’t know where you’re headed with this.’ Ebrahim explains that luckily he and his family have always lived a peaceful life full of compassion towards others, and except for one incident with a ferocious, amoral boy ten years ago – which is too long and too unpleasant a story to be narrated – he has never considered anyone as his enemy, and hence, he doesn’t know what he would or wouldn’t do if put in such a position.

A sudden change of complexion is visible on Joe’s fair face as he listens curiously.

‘And in that specific case,’ Ebrahim continues, ‘although that boy had threatened my family’s *aberu* and my *namous*, and there had been no misjudgement or misinterpretation on my part, every single day in every single

prayer I've asked the Almighty to guide him to the right path and help him grow into a fine man who helps humankind.'

'You have?' Joe is stunned.

'Yes.' Ebrahim looks uncomfortable with the recollection and drinks half of his tea in one go. 'But don't take this as me bragging about my piety. I'm not and will never be as noble as an imam. I did it because we believe that one of the ways through which our prayers will be accepted and our wishes will be granted by God is when we find it in ourselves to make kind-hearted wishes for our least favourite person or enemy.'

Joe seems greatly affected, and takes a moment before he continues. 'I assure you that all your kind-hearted wishes have been granted to that boy, and he really wants this enmity to end.'

Ebrahim's face falls. His trembling hands put the half-full teacup down, while he gives a thorough look at the young engineer from head to toe.

There is a knock at the door, and a co-worker peeks his head in. 'Sorry to interrupt, Joe, but we've got an impatient client who only wants you.'

'Close the door,' says Joe to his co-worker, sending him away.

Ebrahim looks away in deep thought. Joe keeps quiet and lowers his gaze to the ground. Neither of them seems able to utter another word, and the lively conversation dies.

'Excuse me,' murmurs Ebrahim as his final words before he leaves.

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Ebrahim is not himself upon his return home. Without a word to others – except for informing his family of the masked man's wellbeing – he immediately asks to talk to Soo in private. He narrates how his enthusiastic search for the most-admired ended up bringing him face to face with the most-hated. He confronts Soo about this revelation and reprimands her for not divulging such information to him, who has the right to know as her father and the head of the household. He says she must have known it was Joe all along and intentionally kept him in the dark.

‘When I asked you who he was, you answered me with another question, which was: *do I look like I socialise with men or know their personal details?* You know damn well that is called a misleading answer to refrain from lying outright. You intentionally freed yourself from telling me the truth that it was Joe.’

Soo in return tells him she was scared and only meant to protect the family. But she assures him that Joe has not done anything wrong to her, nor will he ever do any harm to the family, and his recent encounter with them on the night of the shooting speaks for itself. However, she wraps up the subject as briefly as possible, making sure there is no mention of any romantic feelings between her and Joe in what she discloses. As such, Ebrahim doesn’t read into things that far, especially in light of the fact that Soo is now married to the best of the suitors they knew of, and hence, he would find it unlikely for Joe to be a threat to their *aberu* and *namous* any longer, even if he wanted to.

Trusting his daughter and convinced by her argument, Ebrahim goes easy on Soo. He only sees this still-ongoing conflict as an antagonism between himself and Joe, rather than a more complex one with Soo also involved. Yet what he will do about this revelation remains in the dark even to Ebrahim himself. Both father and daughter agree to keep this between themselves, so as not to cause any stress to the other Rustins, particularly Khanom Jaan whose poor health is of great concern to them.

## Chapter 9: Khoy

Later that evening, the news on the worsening political crisis, and the government's new tougher military approach to show no mercy in its fight against the rioters, are all over the media. There is a call from Khanom Jaan's other children, notifying her as well as Ebrahim's family about the recent massacres of the demonstrators and the bloodshed on a number of main intersections in the city. They insist that Ebrahim's family join them in leaving Tehran the following day and taking refuge in their country home in Khoy, where they each have a separate house adjacent to one another on a few acres of green land. Ebrahim, who has actually been thinking of the same move, particularly since his school among all the rest has been shut down, agrees to accompany them. Soo is the only one whose heart falls by the thought of what her absence would mean to the orphans.

'Dad,' she asks with a lump in her throat, near tears, 'if I too leave like most other carers have, then what's going to happen to those helpless children?'

'You nearly got us and your husband killed a few days ago. We've already argued over this numerous times and concluded that —'

'But this is different. Everyone is evacuating the city. Those new carers were a temporary solution. They won't last forever. My God, soon there won't be a single carer left to —'

'God wants us to help out as much as we can, but not to the point of endangering ourselves.' A true hero might do that, because his extraordinary powers will protect him, but not ordinary people. As the head of the household, his duty of care starts with his own family, and if and only if he can, he is expected to extend it to others. Besides, he needs some distance and time away from Tehran to think things through and she knows why. More importantly, she has a husband whose orders she is religiously instructed to obey, and there is no way on earth Rasool will allow his wife to stay behind. 'We're leaving tomorrow and that's my final word on that.'

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The enforced six-week stay in the small city of Khoy, where the political upheavals are not as intense and the military curfew non-existent, may have been a blessing in disguise to the Rustins, but Soo as always is a different story. And it isn't just about her missing the orphans and worrying about them. While she and Rasool become more familiar with each other, she longs for a romantic spark to ignite a passionate love between them. Due to Khoy's chilly climate, their place of residence, which was mainly used as a summer home for the families, is too cold at this time of year for any sightseeing or outings. Nonetheless, that doesn't stop Rasool from taking Soo out as often as he can, and continuing with his shopping sprees. In addition, they are now literally neighbours too, and since they have plenty of free time and no work, family gatherings are the number one pastime for all Rustins, and the best opportunity for Rasool to plan for other things in order to take his relationship with his wife to another – hopefully a more physical – level.

Soo, however, refrains from engaging in any type of intimate encounter with him. She needs to be in love with him first, before she can let anything physical happen between them, whereas according to the prescribed standard norms, a loving relationship between a married couple is created after the wife gradually submits to her husband. Rasool is not exactly thrilled about her lack of interest, but being familiar with Soo's personality, he doesn't pressure her into taking steps bigger than she is ready to. He knows tolerance and patience are two key factors with virgins, especially religious brides who are inexperienced and need to take their time in their gradual transition to womanhood.

'Next time you take me out, I'll make sure you leave your wallet at home,' says Soo, walking back home with Rasool, both carrying a few big shopping bags all in white, just like the snow under their feet. 'I appreciate your generosity, but we should really stop spending money excessively and wasting it on unnecessary things. *Esraaf* is *haraam* when there are people dying of hunger around the world.'

'It's not *haraam* if a husband wants to see his wife in all different types and colours of clothing and accessories. It is in fact enjoined by religion. That's what keeps a man from checking out other women.'

‘Excuse me?’ Soo winces, playfully.

He starts laughing. ‘Just kidding! I’d be out of my mind to watch other women when I have the best of the best as my wife. But if you’re worried about *esraaf* as a sin, I’ll personally take full responsibility.’

‘Well, that certainly takes all my worries away,’ she says. ‘I’m serious. Besides, instead of becoming a shopaholic, I’d rather we get to know one another better, talk about ourselves, our plans for the future, perspectives, priorities, aspirations, and so on.’

‘Of course,’ says Rasool, opening the house door with his keys.

‘You always say that, but then we are distracted, often by the next thing you see behind the shop window, which you’re certain would look good on me.’

He makes a gesture to Soo to go inside.

‘No, thanks. We’ve been out for hours. It’s nearly *azaan*. I need to do my prayers and eat. I’m starving. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘That was not an empty *ta’arof*. My mum and sisters have prepared *eftaari* for you to break your *roozeh*, and dinner for both of us. And there is also a surprise.’

‘Really? That is so sweet of them, but my parents —’

‘We’ll call them again if you want, but I’m sure my family has already told them.’

Soo reluctantly accepts. However, after a warm greeting from her in-laws, who excitedly check out the contents of the shopping bags, all the house members except Rasool get ready to go out. They are invited to a dinner at an extended relative’s home by one of Ameneh’s cousins. Soo seems uncomfortable hearing their plan.

‘But you, my darlings, are staying put and enjoying a romantic dinner all by yourselves,’ says Ameneh, smiling. ‘Of course, there is also *eftaari* for my bride who has decided to make herself skin and bone for my poor boy, by fasting in a non-fasting month. But anyway ...’ She guides them into the drawing room where a *sofreh*, with all sorts of edibles and drinks in abundance, is nicely set up on

several layers of high-end Persian rugs. 'Feel free to take your hijab off, Soo. There will be no one here but you and Rasool. Have some mercy on my handsome son who has waited years and saved himself for you,' she says, pinching Rasool's cheek.

Soo starts blushing instantly. She expresses her gratitude for the efforts but looks nervous even long after her in-laws have departed. After *azaan*, they do their evening prayers, and Soo shares her *eftaari* with Rasool. All through the evening, Rasool's different way of staring at her has been agitating her, and so have his attempts to get close to her physically, despite her utter resistance and keeping clear of him. Yet, with Soo being too shy by nature and Rasool still hoping for triumph, neither of them has confronted the other about it. They soon move on to dinner, with Soo sitting on the opposite side of the square-shaped *sofreh* – and not beside him as he has repeatedly suggested – and Rasool rambling on about not much else but one uncomfortable topic.

Lucky for Soo, the dense atmosphere is interrupted by a phone call. It is Moosa, Rasool's younger brother and the only one of his siblings who has stayed back in Tehran to manage their business trades and run the errands of the gallery in the absence of his other family members.

'No, that is ridiculous,' says Rasool over the phone, pacing the area around a wooden buffet at a corner. 'With or without a written contract, they agreed to eight thousand tomans. We shook hands on it with the representative of their village ... What circumstances? You are not to offer them anything more than ten thousand tomans for each piece, and that's only if they deliver all fifty rugs by New Year, and provided we confirm that the quality of the wool and silk is as high as the samples shown to us... No, Dad isn't home, but I'm sure he'd be telling you the very same thing. They won't find a better deal or a better buyer, especially at a turbulent time like this when other businesses are liquidating all their assets into cash.' He looks at Soo who has stopped eating and seems even more unsettled than before. 'I've got to go now. Keep me posted.'

He hangs up, muttering and grumbling. 'Talk about the nerve of some people! Sorry, just a business call at the worst possible time,' says he, sitting back but this time moving his plate and himself closer to Soo. 'So where were we, my

beautiful wife? Yes, as I was saying, the two of us have never had a truly private time together. At home – both yours and mine – we're always in the presence of others, and our supposedly private outings are in public, which amounts to the same thing. So I was desperate for a quality time with you, where we could really be alone.'

'If you don't mind me asking, I thought you only deal with rugs that are priced over one hundred thousand tomans,' says Soo. 'I'm asking, because my friend's father was recently looking to buy a handmade rug as a piece of dowry for my friend, and Dad told them that although they could get a good discount if they came to you, the Rustin Gallery would be way out of their budget.'

'You're changing the subject. But yes, that's right, because we only deal with very fine, elegant, and high quality rugs, most of which are export material and not ordinary, day-to-day rugs affordable to common people,' says Rasool, downing his food with some *sharbat*, homemade fruit punch.

'But didn't you just say that you buy them from the villagers for eight to ten thousand tomans?'

'What is this, my gorgeous wife questioning my integrity and morals in my business transactions?' His sudden laughter conceals the offended look that appears on his face for a split second. 'Shouldn't we be using this hard-to-find opportunity to exchange endearments and get close to one another? Now I know why business and pleasure, work and women should not be mixed. *They're like oil and water.*' He continues to laugh.

'No, seriously. As you know according to the Islamic rules of trade, the middleman is only allowed to add ten percent to the original purchase price and no more, when selling the product to other retailers or customers. I know that most other sellers breach this law, but I always thought that my uncle and his sons were different to —'

'I understand your concern, but believe me we pay the rug-makers much more than our competitors do. My dad wouldn't have it any other way. In fact we pay them about twenty percent more than the average market rate, regardless.'

‘Regardless of what? Regardless of the fact that you’re still making at least ten times more profit than what’s considered a permitted and *halal* rate according to our faith?’

‘Don’t see it that way. You don’t know how it works in the business world. We have the highest number of returning customers, who are all content and willing to do more business with us, even if we make more profit than the ten percent you’re referring to, and —’

‘Just because other business owners are breaking the law more than you are, it doesn’t make the wrong right.’

‘Oh, come on! Since when has any of the Prophet’s constitutions been applied in real practice in everyday life? The global utopia you’re looking for cannot be made on earth, my darling. But if you just concentrate on your relationship with your husband and leave the outside world to me – although you have never asked me for anything terrestrial – I will make sure that living with me as my wife will be like living in paradise.’

‘I’m not after a utopia for humankind, but a bit of decency and fairness in treating others, particularly those who are not as abundantly endowed in fortune as some of us are. Do you not care, or are you not aware of the miserable, traumatic conditions, under which the poor peasants weave these rugs? We’re talking poverty, debt, unemployment, and lack of many other basic essentials. Even if we put aside the afterlife aspect of it, you’d only be making more customers, more trades, more job opportunities, and consequently more profit for everyone if only you give them their fair share, just as God has ordered us to do.’

‘Look, I have better things to do with you tonight than waste my time and energy on this condescending argument, but since you seem to be unconvinced by reason, let me wrap this up by a well-known law in Islam. A woman’s religious responsibility towards finances goes as far as spending her husband’s income with his permission in his household to fulfil his and his children’s needs as well as her own, without questioning him how and where he earns it, even if his source of income is unlawful and *haraam*. Are we clear on this?’

Soo looks away disappointedly, yet after a short pause she apologises to him. 'Please forgive me. Sometimes I go to the extremes in integrating my goals and dreams with yours. And this dangerous ambition of mine is not fair to you. It's like forcing a bird with two different types of wings to fly.'

There is again silence. Rasool gets up agitated. 'No, I should be the one apologising. As my wife you're always welcome to state your opinion on anything, and I'm sorry if I made you feel otherwise.' He brings down a green shopping bag from the coat rack and takes a jewellery box out of it. 'As a matter of fact, I'd like to make it up to you with this.'

'You *knew* you were going to be apologising to me? Come on! There must be an occasion for this, but I can't think of any.'

'Fine, there actually is, if you must know.'

'What?'

'Just open it first.'

She does. It is a complete set of jewellery, a necklace, a bracelet, earrings, and a ring, all elegantly designed with diamonds and rubies. 'They're beautiful.'

'The best there was in the whole jewellery *bazaar* in this city.'

'But you really shouldn't have. These must have cost a fortune. Besides, you and your family have already got heaps of gold and jewellery for me.'

'My wife deserves more.' He then brings out another gift package from the same green bag. 'Open this too!'

'This makes it not one but two surprises?' asks Soo, as she starts unwrapping.

'Well, since I knew I couldn't drag you inside a lingerie store, I had to rely on my mother's and sisters' knowledge about your size and buy these in your absence.'

Soo puts the package down before he completes his sentence, and doesn't even look at its contents which match the colour of the rubies. 'Thanks. I ... I'm sure they are all ... perfectly fine,' she says with a flushed face, putting the jewellery box on top of the half-opened lingerie package.

Noticing Rasool's constant stare at her face and body, she drinks a full glass of water all at once and spills some of it on her veil.

'So, is it – I mean the occasion – our less-than-one-month anniversary?' she asks playfully, yet with a nervous tone of voice.

'No,' replies Rasool, looking serious. 'It's taking our relationship to the next level.'

Soo looks jolted. 'I ... I don't understand ... what level?'

'You're smart enough to have figured out by now that I'm after a more physical and intimate relationship.'

She is getting redder in the face, just like the colour of the lingerie he has chosen for her. She pulls her veil closer to her face.

'Listen, I understand that you're inexperienced, shy, reserved, and on top of all, you are a religious girl who is also a virgin. But our wedding is approaching, and we should gradually take steps toward becoming a husband and wife in the real sense.'

'And we still have a few months till then.'

'I am twenty-nine years of age and have waited for you for as long as I can remember. I might be willing to wait until our wedding night, but I don't want to have to wait any longer than that, and neither do our elders who'll be waiting behind our bedroom door. I hope you understand that.'

'I do.'

'Then you should know that the way things are between us is not helping at all. How are we supposed to go all the way on our wedding night if you keep this up?'

'Keep what up? I just need more time to —'

'Oh, for crying out loud, not only do you always have your covers on when I'm around, you also refrain from any type of physical contact with me. I've never seen a strand of your hair, nor your body, neither have I ever been allowed to the slightest touch or a hug or anything. How am I – even now as your husband – any different to the rest of your suitors, who only fancied you in their

imagination? Everyone can obviously see you're thin, tall, and incredibly attractive, plus we have indirect knowledge of your hidden physical attributes through other secondary sources, namely their female relatives, sisters, mothers, aunts, etc. But I know nothing more than I did before.'

'I guess I'm not ready for this step yet,' says Soo, resenting what she hears.

'And knowing you, you won't be ready until I do something about it.' He comes towards her, but before he can sit in front of her she gets up and moves back. He picks up the jewellery box as well as the lingerie package and stands in front of her. 'Didn't you want us to be in love before our wedding night?'

'Yes, but —'

'Then let me make it happen. I want to see how these look on my stunning wife whose body I've heard —'

'No, please don't,' she interrupts him. 'As you know, what I meant was non-physical ways of falling in love, which I'm sure do exist.'

'This is the initial requisite for any type of love.'

Soo shakes her head, stepping further back. 'This is degrading love and turning it into a one-dimensional, sensual entity. It is cheapening a sacred notion which happens to be the most poignant and powerful connection any two people can have.'

'Alright, the lingerie was a stupid idea. Just give me permission to uncover you and put the jewellery on you. I sure wouldn't mind it if this dinner leads to other things I'm hoping to see happen between us tonight, but we can stop at any phase and anytime you like.'

'I'd be crazy not to desire physical intimacy with my husband, but only when it is an end product, not an initiator or a prerequisite to everything else love is about. Excuse me. I need to go.' Soo runs off to the silent yard where she only hears the stuff he was holding get thrown at the drawing room window and crash on the rugs, before she closes the yard door behind her.

In less than a minute she reaches home frustrated and in tears. On the one hand, she is guilt-ridden about her lack of submission to her husband, and on the

other, she is unsure about ever being able to do so, as long as there is no passionate love between them, and Joe constantly on her mind.

She throws herself into the arms of her mother, the first person she faces inside the corridor. 'I wish I were dead, Mum!' She cries on her mother's shoulder as they both enter the living room, where only Khanom Jaan is present.

Both her elders admit having been informed by Ameneh about Rasool's plan for the night, and try to calm her down. They take Soo's despair and sorrow for her unawareness about physical courtship between married couples, thinking Rasool has made certain moves on her, which have frightened the naïve, shy girl.

A naughty smile appears on Khanom Jaan's face. 'My poor girl! It's obvious your mother hasn't yet had "the birds and the bees talk" with you, has she? Come sit with me. I remember the first time I was approached by your grandfather, God bless his soul.'

'It isn't that, Khanom Jaan. I'm not a two-year-old.'

'Then what is it?'

'It's everything. It's religion, it's culture, it's our people and community, and it's me as an unusual woman. What kind of a wife will I make? If God doesn't save me, I'll be in hell both in this life and the afterlife.' She runs to her room, sobbing.

Even later on, she can't see it in herself to open up to others about the pain she is in. Her only confidante is a religious semi-scholar who holds preaching sessions for women in Khoy's main mosque. She is of the opinion that by staying away from the man she feels passionate about, Soo will eventually forget about him. She also recommends some special prayers and mantras, all of which Soo has already tried. And lastly, she strongly suggests that in order to save her marriage she should let her husband do whatever he pleases with her. Even if it feels unpleasant at first, it will become easier once she gets used to it. Moreover, the physical bond will lead to strengthening their relationship and creating affection between them.

Soo is now more dubious and reluctant than ever. She has always thought of love-making as an inevitable reaction to lovers' desire to achieve even closer

proximity than what they already have, not something that would require getting used to as though it is a task or a duty in need of completion and alleviation.

## Chapter 10: Fire

While still in Khoy, there is yet another agonising incident about a week later, just before the onset of the 1979 Revolution, to further devastate Soo. A fire set by anti-regime protesters on the streets has spread to the orphanage. Unfortunately, nothing could be done in time, and the uncontrollable blaze has taken the lives of many children. Rasool's brother Moosa, who is still in Tehran, notifies his family in Khoy, but knowing the way Soo would react, Rasool tells them to keep it from her. Soo nevertheless finds out through a phone call from one of her friends, and is greatly disturbed. The severity of the grief becomes too overwhelming, to the point where she has to be tranquilised by medication in order to get some sleep. But none of her elders – or Rasool – shares the same degree of sympathy to consent her return to the capital, nor is anyone willing to accompany her.

‘How is she, *Amoo*?’ asks Rasool, springing to his feet on the upstairs staircase, behind the door to Soo's room.

‘Not well, I'm afraid,’ replies Ebrahim in a quiet voice, closing the door behind him, while carrying the holy book and a tray of medicine. ‘But we did manage to finally put her to sleep with some strong meds. How long that will last, *Allaho a'lam*, God is all-knowing.’

‘I still can't believe the mentality of that so-called friend of hers. Why would someone give a friend such shattering news knowing how she feels about those orphans?’

‘Still, the bigger calamity would have been her heading back to the orphanage. Thank God you told us when you did, or she would have fled without our consent. I saw the small suitcase she had packed for tonight.’

‘She won't see it the way you do. Not only did I refuse to accompany her, but I also went behind her back and notified you. I am sure if it hadn't been for her religious duty she wouldn't have revealed to me what she was up to either.’

‘You did the right thing.’ Ebrahim gives Rasool a pat on the shoulder. ‘Don't worry, she'll come around. Let's just pray that she pulls through this. I hate the thought of having to take her to the doctors. Do you want to go inside?’

‘No, now that she is asleep there is no point disturbing the other ladies with my presence.’

‘Fine then. Your mother will be out soon. Just take her home and get some rest. God knows we can all use some sleep. These past couple of days have been a living hell for all of us.’

The wall clock in Soo’s room shows 2:30 am. Khanom Jaan is asleep, curled up in a corner, leaning against a few large bolsters, with a *tasbeeh* hanging around her wrist, and her mantra book still open in front of her. All around Soo’s bed there are jars, bowls, and glass cups containing a variety of traditional home remedies known to calm the nerves and cure insomnia, mixed or dissolved in water or other liquids. The sudden jerks of Soo’s chest muscle, and the involuntary up and down motion of her swollen red eyelids, show how she keeps drifting into and out of sleep, at the same time breaking the heart of her family members. Her quiet wails are still audible through her tired lungs and irritated vocal cords. Yet the tears have fortunately subsided for now.

Sara brings out another pillow from the wall closet. ‘Mum, her pillow is soaked in tears. If you hold her head up, I can put this new one under her —’

‘Goodness me, forget it, child!’ says Ameneh.

‘Your auntie is right,’ says Shireen. ‘The slightest movement and she’ll be up again, shedding a hundred times more tears. Bring a blanket for your grandmother instead. The poor woman has been up for two days and just now fell asleep sitting.’ Shireen then faces their guest, while putting a few small plastic bags of some powdery herbs and substances in her purse. ‘Thank you for coming and thank you for these, Ms Ameneh. I had honestly lost hope for her, but they did wonders.’

‘You can keep them,’ says Ameneh, handing the plastic bags back to Shireen, and heaving herself up to leave. ‘I have to admit, I had lost hope for her too. I mean none of us wanted this terrible accident to happen, but it’s ridiculous to mourn like this for a bunch of orphans who are not our blood-relatives – in fact they are no one’s blood relatives.’

Shireen and Sara exchange a look but refrain from any sort of dispute. She is both a guest as well as an elder.

Ameneh continues while fixing her veil on her head, 'What's worse is her persuading my son to secretly run back to the heart of all the bloodshed.' She believes that as newlyweds, Soo and Rasool should be having the time of their lives together in the safe haven of Khoy, rather than planning on getting themselves killed. Once Soo wakes up, Shireen should talk some sense into her or people are going to think the girl has gone mad.

Even in a week's time when the revolution is well over, they try reasoning with Soo that the dust hasn't yet settled, and Tehran is still facing the aftermath of an enormous governmental changeover, and hence unsafe. Her wellbeing – both physical as well as psychological – is becoming a major concern to all. Her continuous fasting and her shattered emotional state are alarming, but no one and nothing is able to alter her perspective or reduce her agony.

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Their return to the capital doesn't happen until a month after the revolution. In fact, if it hadn't been for some rumours about the Ministry of Education's plans to reopen the schools soon, as well as the big wedding ahead of them, Ebrahim would have kept his family in Khoy for longer. Upon arrival, it is striking to find the new Tehran so unpleasantly different in only six weeks of their absence. The city looks more like a ghost town now with all sorts and colours of slogans written as graffiti on everything that meets the eyes, and a great deal of excess rubbish – things utilised and discarded by the protestors and the police – that is yet to be collected and swept away from the streets. Although it is past midnight, they can see the love of nightlife still alive in many Tehrani residents who look comparatively happier now. After all, there is finally peace, the military curfew is lifted, and they have more hope than ever that the promised social modifications will become a reality soon. Ebrahim takes a longer route in his car, making sure they don't pass by the burnt Welfare, and Rasool follows him in his own car, having on board Soo and Khanom Jaan as his passengers.

In the morning, Soo sneaks out of the house to head to the Welfare. Even though her restrictions related to the curfew are no longer in place, she'd rather not encounter another preaching session from her elders telling her to forget about the orphans and concentrate on her wedding. And much to her luck, Rasool has

never spent the night at their house after their religious marriage, which is what is expected of the couple before their wedding, and hence, there is one less objector for Soo to worry about.

Time, she had heard and thought, is the greatest healer, yet her red tearful eyes prove otherwise. Seeing a mountain of black ruins where the Welfare building used to be, brings back the same panic she felt the first time she heard the shocking news five weeks ago. She asks a sweeper nearby, as well as the shopkeeper across the street, about the remaining children and the staff. She is told that they have been relocated to other orphanages either by the City Council or the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

Soo first heads to the Council, which is the closest in destination. The place is in a total disorder, and the personnel – noticeably scanty in number – are not at all cooperative. The angry clients and enquirers waiting in long queues are being told to be patient and check back in April, after the New Year holidays. They are reminded that there is not yet a cabinet for the new revolutionary government, and in addition, there has been a turnover of power throughout the key administrative posts in all the ministries. As such their errands need to wait. Soo's enquiry is comparatively the easiest to be vetoed, since it is simply out of their jurisdiction.

Consequently she is sent to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, the atmosphere of which is not much different to that of the former place. After a wild-goose chase, going from one office to another, Soo gets into an argument with the receptionist. She is told that she has never been an official employee of the Welfare. Moreover, she is not a relative of any of the children, nor does she have guardianship authority. Therefore, she cannot be given the information she is after. Soo explains how much these children mean to her and the devastation she has felt by the news of the catastrophe.

'All this uncooperativeness, this lack of sympathy, is because I was nothing but a volunteer? They're like my own kids. I have developed a strong bond with them, especially those under the age of one. For some of them my name was their first word. I have to find them. I'm sure the remaining ones are still in great need of assistance. Please help me help them.'

‘Ma’am, all I can tell you is that they were dispersed throughout different orphanages, some of them in other cities. We can give you the list of the orphanages nationwide,’ he says, bringing out a paper from his desk drawer. ‘You mentioned that you’re particularly attached to the infants, but unfortunately the information we have indicates that all the survivors are over the age of one.’

‘Oh my God no,’ says Soo, as she grasps the back of a chair for support but slides off the chair, and nearly ends up on the floor. A woman at the back of the queue comes to her side. ‘It can’t be. If they were all gone, I’d know. I’d have a hint, a clue. But I don’t. Something within me tells me otherwise.’

A female employee brings a glass of sugar water, but Soo is fasting. She manages to get up and heads straight to the first orphanage on the list, a thirty-minute drive from the Ministry. Luckily the guard is not too strict on allowing a short visit to an ex-volunteer, especially when she names the manager of the burnt orphanage as well as a few of its main employees.

Soo is thrilled to see a handful of transferred teenagers on their afternoon school break, who run to greet her happily. However, when asked about the infants, they are oblivious, saying the older, more mobile kids got out of the fire quickly, which is why the most casualties were among the younger ones.

A female voice calling her name turns Soo’s head around. It is Ms Partovi, one of the carers in the former infants’ ward. As their eyes meet after two months, they start shedding tears even before they run and embrace one another in deep sorrow.

‘Please tell me you have seen or heard of the little ones in our ward ... at least some of them must have survived the fire.’

Ms Partovi shakes her head while she sobs. ‘I wish to God I could, Soo.’

‘No,’ says Soo, as she suddenly becomes quiet.

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Soo opens her eyes in a hospital with her parents and a female doctor standing around her bed, and an IV in her wrist. Shireen tells her that Ms Partovi had called them and notified them about her fainting in her arms. Ebrahim briefs the

doctor on the reasons for his daughter's un-wellness and debilitation, as well as her steady fasting. The doctor confirms that it is only the drop of blood pressure due to lack of nutrients in her bloodstream, which is also aggravated by the psychological trauma. She says that although grief takes its natural course, in order to prevent the recurrence of the fainting episodes, her fasting should be stopped, and once her blood pressure is up she can be discharged.

Soon after the doctor leaves, Rasool knocks at the door and asks for permission to enter. '*Ya Allah!*'

Soo straightens herself up, making sure she is nicely covered, something that makes her parents exchange a look full of astonishment. 'It's only Agha Rasool, your husband,' says Shireen.

Rasool comes in with a chic bundle of decorated pastry, a bag of snacks, and a bunch of flowers for Soo. He says he has come straight from his uncle Ebrahim's home once he's heard the news. 'I'm so sorry, Soo.'

'It's just not fair.' Soo starts crying again. 'Those children became victims of the cruel world of politics, without even knowing what that word meant.'

'Who says *anything* in life is fair, sweetheart?' Shireen gives her a hug.

'They never felt the warmth of a loving parent's arms, nor a family's affection. The infants hadn't even seen their first birthday. My God, how can all those beautiful children be gone? I will never accept that.'

They try to keep her calm, and offer her drinks and other things, which she forces herself to swallow while shedding tears. With the IV liquid running in her veins, her fasting is already void for the day, and so there is no reason for her to starve herself in vain.

'Dad, how many of us Rustins have a family of our own in total?' asks Soo.

'I am not sure, honey, maybe fifty or so.'

'If each of us had adopted two, only two of them, they'd be out of that place and alive now.'

'Don't do this to yourself. Life and death are in God's hands,' says Ebrahim.

‘That’s right. But God only took them back to Him because no one found it in their hearts to give them a shelter on earth, or even cared enough to spend a short time watching over them. If they at least had enough carers, they could have made it out of the fire on time before those flames ...’ She weeps bitterly, bringing tears into her visitors’ eyes.

‘Who knew this would happen? If I had, as God is my witness, I would have adopted all of them, at least temporarily until we could find suitable parents for them,’ says Ebrahim.

Soo continues, ‘Rasool, you promised me that we’d adopt and raise a few of them as our own.’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why did we wait until we move into our own home? We could have saved the lives of at least a few of them.’

‘Just eat and rest as much as you can,’ says Rasool with a sigh. ‘You’ll feel and think differently about everything once you regain your energy and health.’

‘That’s right,’ says Shireen. ‘Besides, if you and Rasool are really into helping these children, there’s always plenty other orphans you can —’

‘You’re not helping.’ Ebrahim cuts Shireen short, while shooting her a dagger-like look.

He then faces Soo. ‘Honey, I know this is a difficult phase for you, but as they say, *this shall pass too*. Rasool must be crazy about you to have accepted such a condition, and for that I’m grateful to him. But I think this accident was in a way a means for you to finally detach yourself from these children and move on. You have so much else to look forward to in life, such as your wedding, your new home, your own future children.’

‘My thoughts exactly,’ confirms Rasool.

Yet Soo is already opening up her bag and bringing out a paper, while Shireen taps dry her daughter’s tears with a ball of tissues. ‘I’ve got the list of all the orphanages in this country. Please tell me you’ll help me check each and every one to see if there is any news of the infants,’ says Soo, looking at them with pleading eyes. ‘And if you can’t help me, then for the sake of God at least

don't stand in my way. And about my fasting, you of all people should understand that it is a votive promise to God, which cannot be broken.'

While her ceaseless mourning breaks the hearts of her family members even long after she returns home, their anguish and concern about her wellbeing and her future life increase by the minute. In light of her poor health throughout this period of grief, they try to be more supportive and understanding, hoping to expedite her recovery. They have long given up on trying to talk some sense into her or change her viewpoint.

Within the next week, all the orphanages in Tehran are visited and the ones in other cities are contacted either by Soo or by her family members. Yet, there is absolutely no sign of the infants, and all the evidence points to the fact that the younger ones, being more vulnerable to harm, have all lost their lives. Time has never been so ineffective in its healing power for Soo.

Along her agonising journey to find some hope she gives a visit to the fire department as well as the headquarters of the two national newspapers, *Ettela'at* and *Kayhan*. Her trip to the fire department is just as futile an endeavour as the rest of what she has done so far. There is no record of the way they have dealt with that fire emergency, nor does anyone know the name of the branch or team of the attending firefighters involved in that mission.

According to what she is told at the two newspaper headquarters, there has been no coverage of the incident. There were far more significant political events happening around the country that overshadowed other news. She is nevertheless able to obtain a copy of that day's *Ettela'at*, which contains a small picture of the fire in one of its last pages. It only has a short, one-line story that says nothing more than what she already knows about the incident. She asks where she can find the photographer, but they can't give out that information to the public, and the devastated Soo returns home.

Luckily, upon her insistence, Salman comes to his sister's rescue. His friend's father is an ex-employee of *Ettela'at* Newspaper, and by pulling a few strings he is able to find the name of the photographer and an appointment is made for Soo to meet him in a few days' time. The Rustins instruct her to be accompanied by Salman, lest something again happens to her outside.

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The siblings meet the photographer, Khosrow Zohoori, in a vast office shared by many colleagues. He is a chubby man in his forties, with shoulder-length black hair and golden-framed glasses. Salman explains his sister's circumstances and the reason for their urgent meeting with him.

Zohoori tells them that he can't be of any help to them, simply because he has no information about the fire incident at all. 'To be honest, I was coerced against my will into going to the location that day, and it was for a different reason. I was sent to photograph the political riot. I didn't know about the fire until I got there. I was only there for less than a minute, around midnight during the curfew. I quickly took the pictures of the protest, none of which turned out well, and then I ran away.'

A staff member comes enquiring about the driver of the white Peugeot outside. It is the Rustins' car, and they are kindly asked to move it to a different location as they need to make room for an oversized truck. Although Soo is the one with a driver's licence and who actually drove the car there, to prevent an unnecessary interruption to the session, Salman offers to help his sister out. 'I'll take care of it, Sis.' He gets the car keys from Soo and asks to be excused momentarily to move the car.

'Please try to remember. Did you see any young children, anything, or anyone that can be a clue to ...' says Soo, repeating what Salman has already asked him.

'I swear I can't remember. It was the most horrifying moment of my life, the protesters, the fire flames, the screaming kids, the guards shootings from every direction ... It was hell by all means. I saw people get killed in front of my very eyes. For a photographer, no picture, no matter how valuable, is worth losing your life over, so I quickly returned to my office,' says Zohoori, loosening the tie around his neck and drinking a full glass of water.

Soo is in tears. He pushes the tissue box on his desk towards her.

'I'm so sorry I couldn't be of any help. I don't even know how that accidental picture made it to the paper.' He bends over a large drawer in his file

cabinet. 'Here are the rest of them, to prove my point. Have a look if you want. I put them among last month's waste photos to dispose of.' He brings out a few pictures bound together. 'As you can see, all my shots of the protesters are pretty much from the same angle and lacking proper composition. Most of them are even fuzzy and also out of focus.'

Soo looks hesitant but slowly extends her arm toward the pictures, while tears roll down her cheeks.

'So sorry. How inconsiderate of me! I didn't mean to revive the trauma to you.'

'No, I'd like to take a look, if you don't mind,' says Soo, wiping her tears with the edge of her veil.

He is right. The first three are blurry. But the fourth shot, despite being out of focus, has clearly captured something in the background which makes this visit a turning point in Soo's life. The pictures slip from her fingers, and her trembling hands cover her face. 'Oh, my God! He is carrying a bunch of infants with him,' she whispers.

'Are you alright, ma'am? What did you see?' asks Zohoori, getting up from his chair and picking up the photos.

'I'm beyond alright. I saw someone who has made all the difference in the world to me. I am now certain that some of those children are alive.' Soo points at the fourth photo.

'I see. I'm thrilled that you finally got something out of this visit.'

Soo thanks him greatly and starts heading out, but turns around and walks back to his desk. 'Sir, could I please have a copy of that fourth photo?'

'I'm sorry. As a rule of thumb, we don't disclose such material to the public, especially anything related to political matters where people's identities are to be treated as highly confidential.'

'But I know this man, and as you can see, he is obviously not involved in the riots, and is only carrying some infants out of the fire. Besides, I won't show this picture to anyone else, or publish it or anything. I swear I won't.'

‘Still, rules are rules. Why do you need this anyway? You seem to have got the information you were after.’

‘The infants he is carrying are some of the missing orphans my brother explained about before. If he denies having to do anything with these children, this picture will be my proof to the contrary. But it will only be between me and him. I promise not to show this to anyone else or tell them who he is.’

‘Ah, alright. Since you seem to be a trustworthy person, and this picture obviously means a lot to you, I’ll make an exception this time. But remember that I’m taking your word for it.’

Soo heads out rejoicing. ‘Thank God and thanks to Joe,’ whispers Soo, staring at the copy of the photo while half-walking and half-running towards the exit.

She spots Salman on his way back into the building and hides the photo in her purse. He is just as thrilled to hear the good news. However, on the way back in the car, he raises his concern about this discovery.

‘Sis, like they say, I hate “to be a wet blanket” and *ayeye ya’s khoondan*, recite the disappointment verse, but please think rationally. It is quite possible that the man in the picture and the children he is carrying didn’t make it out alive.’

‘Not him. Not the hero I know. If he’s got them, they’re alive,’ says Soo inaudibly, looking out the driver side’s window as she comes to a stop at the red light.

‘I beg your pardon,’ says Salman, bringing his head close to Soo.

‘Never mind!’

‘Even if a few of them have been lucky enough to survive, there is no sign of them in the orphanages, and we’ve already contacted every single orphanage there is. Please tell me you’re not thinking of hiring a private investigator to look for a white bird in a blizzard. For your sake and everyone else’s, whether those kids are dead or alive, do the reasonable thing and leave them alone.’

At home, the rest of the Rustins are just as thankful to God for this blessing, especially since such godsend relief could not have come at a better time for their

tormented Soo. As promised, Soo doesn't divulge any information about the rescuer to anyone.

The recent news has been like fresh blood injected into Soo's dried veins. All she can think of is to find out about the wellbeing of the surviving infants. She also can't believe Joe would fail to notify her about the children. In light of their past, she is very reluctant to contact him, but this not knowing about the children is tearing her apart. She finally forces herself to dial his number, yet she is unsuccessful in her numerous attempts. There is no answer. She can't think of any other means of reaching him. She knows her father has Joe's business card and contact details, but he is the last person Soo would go to for such information. The other person that comes to her mind is the manager of the burnt orphanage. However, no one Soo has asked knows where he is, even if he has stayed alive. Something else hits her.

'His regular Thursday night party house. What day is today?' she says to herself. 'But no. What am I thinking?'

Even if she does find him there tomorrow, she's going against everything her culture and religion have prescribed for her. She is a married woman whose elders, her husband, and whoever else she knows in the community would not approve of such a visit, and more importantly, neither would God. She'll be wilfully committing a sin. 'My God, what has become of me lately?'

She spends half the night repenting and begging God for salvation. Yet the rest of the night is a hell on its own. She has nightmares of half-burnt children all piled up on a stagecoach while Joe wildly dashes them away from the flames, shooting the military guards on his way, all the while oblivious of the children who are falling off, one by one, from the back of the stagecoach.

She changes her mind. This is a never-ending misery she can't tolerate unless she has some insight into the children's condition. She has to find Joe.

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Later in the afternoon on the following day, Soo nearly sneaks out of the house, only telling one person in the household that she has an urgent errand to run.

‘You can’t be serious, Soo.’ Shireen can’t believe her ears. ‘Rasool is picking you up in an hour, and —’

‘No, he isn’t.’

‘Have you forgotten about your appointment with the tailor for your wedding gown at five, and then his niece’s birthday party at seven?’

‘I’ve already cancelled on Rasool.’

‘You did what?’

‘Would you keep it down, Mum? If Khanom Jaan wakes up from her nap, I won’t have the end of it.’

Soo rushes to the same villa in Oushan Fasham where she once saved Tahmineh. The loud beat of the music as she approaches the villa takes away any prior doubt she had about the possible relinquishment of such gatherings after the Islamic Revolution. In actual fact, it isn’t until months after the revolution that the new regime enforces mandatory coverage for women in public, and bans mixed parties, alcohol, gambling, and music.

She stops at the entrance with much hesitation and reluctance. The same doorman, Jamshid, is sitting at the entry area, just as he did two months ago when she came looking like a man. A couple of women, heavily made up and wearing flashy clothes, are standing behind Jamshid’s desk and blocking Soo’s view of his face, but his hairy arms and unique hoarse voice prove that he is the same guy. Other guests arrive with much similar ostentatious appearances and attires and pass Soo by, giving her a look. The doorman sounds annoyed by the interrogating questions of the two women about Joe, while at the same time he attends to the newcomers, asking for their names and the entry password.

‘You say he is not in prison. Then what on earth has become of him?’ says the first girl. ‘He hasn’t called me for ages. I have left several messages, and still I can’t find him here or anywhere.’

‘I couldn’t believe my ears but I heard he was last seen here bringing in a bunch of newborns and then taking them somewhere else,’ says the second girl.

‘You even went in there and checked the whole place for yourselves. Sorry, but he is a bit too big to fit in my pocket,’ says he with a shrug and a mocking grin.

The first woman gives a glare to him and storms out, followed by the second one, who sticks her gum on his desk before leaving. With them gone, he notices Soo’s presence near the entrance door. He winces while getting up instantly and coming toward her, after spitting out the toothpick he has between his teeth. ‘Miss, someone like you doesn’t belong here. You’re either at the wrong address or sent here by mistake.’

‘I need to talk to Mr Joe Raad,’ says Soo, hoping he doesn’t recognise her from her previous visit.

‘What!? You too? But he doesn’t do veiled girls.’ His comment startles him more than it does Soo. ‘Sorry, that didn’t come out right. I mean none of the women he is – or should I say *used to be* – involved with is your type.’

‘Never mind. I have a different matter to discuss with him, which is quite urgent. I am looking for those young children, and he is the only one who can help me. Please, I desperately need —’

Just then a group of other women arrive and interrupt Soo with their loud, cheerful grinning. She steps back when they come straight to Jamshid while giving Soo a suspicious look. A couple of them start asking him about Joe.

‘This is unbelievable. I’ve had it up to here with this,’ he says, raising his voice.

‘Everything okay, Jamshid?’ asks a big muscular man, coming through the outside door, holding hands with a woman who has made herself a lookalike to Marilyn Monroe.

The new man sounds familiar to Soo, something that makes her even more uncomfortable. She pulls her veil closer to her face and tries to hide behind the other women.

‘Hey, Teymoor,’ says Jamshid. ‘You’ve got to help me out here, man. Whenever there is a party here, Joe’s exes storm in bombarding me with questions about him and his whereabouts. As if that wasn’t enough, now other

people are after him too. That tall veiled lady at the back wants to see him about a bunch of missing children. Do I look like a private investigator or is this place a missing persons' agency?'

Teymoor gives a quick look at the women, and a long astonished look at Soo. 'I'll take care of it.' He guides his date to the yard, telling her he'll join her in a minute and then faces the women. 'Look, ladies. I know Joe personally. There have been some astonishing changes in Joe's life lately. All his close friends believe that he is romantically involved with a girl, and it is quite serious. They say he is madly in love with her.'

Soo is sweating through her clothing whereas the other women look disbelieving; some even start to laugh out loud. Teymoor, however, insists on the fact.

'When did this happen?' asks one of the women.

'A few months ago. If I were you I wouldn't waste my time pursuing him any longer. She seems to be the most important thing in his life.'

Soo looks like she is about to faint.

'Assuming there *is* such a person in his life, who is this mystery girl?'

'He won't reveal her identity,' says he. 'I'd greatly appreciate it if you spread the word around and let the other girls know as well.'

The women grumble their way out of the villa.

Teymoor takes a few steps towards Soo, giving her a thorough head-to-toe look. 'Excuse me, ma'am! Just wait for a while. I'll see what I can do for you.'

Soo is taken aback by his favourable suggestion. 'Sure, yes, I mean that's very kind of you.'

He pulls Jamshid out of the entry area and into the yard with him. 'Could you get me a radio? I haven't got mine on me today. Whose shift is it, anyway?'

'You're going to disturb Joe for some unknown woman when we already know he is going to veto your request, especially at a time when he's got his hands full with those little kids? For crying out loud, the last time we saw him

here was when he brought the kids in a hurry and then transferred them to another location. Doesn't that tell you how busy he is?'

'I know all that.'

'Then you probably don't know that for some unknown reason he is determined to keep the kids for now and is not willing to give them up for adoption. Why do you suddenly want to help this girl find those infants? She is smoking hot alright, but I didn't think you'd —'

'Would you shut up? You'd cut out your own tongue if you knew who you're talking about.'

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In fifteen minutes a loud motorbike zooms into the alley and comes to an even louder stop. Soo is outside the villa to be away from the loud music and more importantly to avoid coming face to face with every single guest that steps inside.

Joe takes his helmet off and quickly spots her leaning against a tree on the opposite side of the alley. After securing his bike, he comes towards her. The wind is blowing right through his wavy hair which is longer than ever, covering the upper half of his face. He pushes his hair back. 'You look sick. It's cold. Let's go inside.'

Soo follows him inside the entry area. Jamshid does a quick greeting and hands him the notes his exes have left. Joe tears them up without even looking at them and leaves the pieces on Jamshid's desk near a tray of nibbles and drinks. He faces Soo with an audible sigh. 'You wanted me, and here I am.'

'Where on earth are they? I know you were there when the fire happened. I know you saved some of them. I can't thank you enough for what you've done, but why did you not notify me? Why did you make me suffer like this? Answer me. I know you're hiding something from me, but I don't know why.'

'*Hiding* something? Excuse me? Are we on the same page?'

'Am I not speaking your language?' She brings out the picture and he catches it in mid-air when she tosses it to him. 'A few of the infants are in your arms, even inside your jacket, and I'm sure some are in the big sack on your back

as well. Don't you dare deny it! It's obvious how tiny they are, and the beanie hats some of them have on are the ones I knitted for them, when the heating wasn't working. Though the photo is black and white the small pom-poms dangling from their top prove that these are my hats and my kids. Where are they? You knew all along where they were, and you let me go through hell?'

'I did *what*?'

'I was worried sick about them, thinking they're all burnt to ashes or left on the streets to be kidnapped, or eaten by wild cats and dogs. You knew they meant the world to me, and yet you kept this a secret? I thought you cared about me,' she says with a lump in her throat. 'I never thought you could be this cruel, cold-hearted, and vicious to the woman you claim to ...'

The sound of car doors being slammed, along with the loud laughter of the new arrivals outside interrupts them. Soo walks away, close to tears, and faces the opposite wall, while Jamshid rushes to the entrance to quickly guide the guests through the entry and keep them clear of Joe. As the guests come in, they are stunned to find the life and soul of the party, right there at the entrance, near a veiled girl, and looking not at all in the party mood.

'Well, if it isn't the missing man of the hour! Congrats on the completion of your military service, by the way,' says a girl, heading towards Joe.

But Jamshid stops her, saying this is the worst possible time to be near Joe. Then following a head gesture from Joe, he sends them all straight into the yard.

'Put this sign out, and lock both doors,' says Joe, putting the picture in his pocket to get a hold of a sign in a corner that reads: *Enter through the parking gate at the back*, with a red arrow underneath it, showing the detour route. 'And tell them to turn the music down.'

Once those are done, Jamshid attempts to give Soo and Joe some privacy. 'I'll just be behind this door,' he says, at the entrance to the yard, before closing the door behind him.

Joe, however, tells him that she won't be in the same room with him or talk to him in private. He asks him to stay but not to publicise a word of what he hears.

After telling another friend to open the parking gate for the upcoming guests, Jamshid sits back behind his desk and opens up a magazine in front of his face to block his view of Soo and Joe.

Joe faces Soo. 'Just calm down! You've got it all wrong.'

'Then correct me before I go insane.'

'What difference does it make to you now? You've shown up here after all these days to do what? You made your choice to leave them behind and move on with that dummy husband of yours.'

'What's that supposed to mean? I pined for those kids. I cried day and night but was forbidden to return to Tehran to do anything for them. Once we did come back, I searched everywhere, every neighbour, everyone I knew, and every organisation, in the hope of finding even the slightest information about them. I was even hospitalised over them, living a hell of a life, until I found that picture from the Ettela'at Newspaper Headquarters. How dare you —'

'You pined and searched for them and went through all this, yet you never once contacted me to ask me about them?'

'How on earth could I have known you had any news of them? I had no idea about your presence there until yesterday when I found that picture, and then I kept calling you for hours last night, but there was no —'

'My God! He didn't tell you, did he?'

'Who? What are you talking about?'

'It figures. And why should he? That no good son of a ...' He starts pacing the ground near her. 'So much for the promises he made!'

She holds her forehead. 'I can't make any sense out of —'

'You don't look well at all.' He pulls up a chair next to her, but she doesn't sit. 'I wanted to notify you when the incident happened, but I knew you had left Tehran two weeks before the revolution. After the revolution took place on the twenty-second of *Bahman*, every night for a month I passed by your house to see if you had returned. Then eleven days ago when you finally came back I tried to inform you. I couldn't show up there myself to directly talk to you or give you a

note, so I sent my grandmother to your door as an anonymous messenger. It was around midday on a Monday. I even taught her a coded sentence, so that only *you* would figure out who the sender was.'

'A *coded* sentence?'

'Doesn't matter,' he says. 'She said your husband answered the door.'

'What!? I never heard any of this. How does she know it was him?'

'He introduced himself as your family's son-in-law to get rid of her, thinking she was a relative of a new suitor, and her description of him fits only your husband's. Thin and tall with straight jet-black hair and dark complexion. Besides, who else in your family could watch you get tormented and yet would deceitfully keep you in the dark? You've got someone to blame and yell at, go back to the man you've chosen over all others.'

'I can't believe he'd ...' Soo starts crying quietly and reflects on the heartbreaking discovery about her husband.

Joe gets some clean tissues for her from his pocket.

She shakes her head and gets her own ones out of her purse. 'Never mind him. I've come here to see the kids. Please tell me where they are.'

'No.'

'No?'

'You're better off without them. By the looks of it, they will never again be a part of your life, so you might as well just forget about them.'

'Haven't you heard a word of what I've said? I wouldn't be here if I could forget —'

'What good would that do now? You're about to start a life with your husband who clearly wants nothing to do with any children other than his own with his trophy wife.'

'Don't you go there again! And we're *not* planning on —'

'But *he is*. And you can't live a double life. You've made a choice to have a future where there is obviously no room for such kids and there will never be.'

‘It’s not like that, and I said —’

‘It’s *exactly* like that.’

‘I said leave him out of this. All I want is to check up on the kids, at least once, please.’

‘To do what?’ he snaps at her, making Jamshid wince. ‘To start investing in them again emotionally, love them as your own, and get them attached to you as you did before, when he won’t want you near them? Do you know what a terrible emotional impact it would have on them, not to mention on you?’

‘All this sentiment from a man who has numerous times admitted hating children?’

‘I’d rather let my deeds do the talking for me. And no, take this from a man who knows what it’s like to be raised without a mother, going from one woman to another, longing for certainty. And it isn’t all because of the tragic loss of my mother. It’s also longing for this eccentric soul, or whatever she is, who not only saved my life but in doing so also gave meaning to it, at a time when life really meant nothing to me.’

Soo’s jaw drops at this astonishing revelation.

‘Yet I had to let her go for her own good, but I never recovered from that loss because nothing ever replaced her and I’m sure nothing ever will. And now here I am, losing everything again just when I thought I had finally found hope and happiness. I don’t want anyone to go through that.’

They exchange a look and share a moment. There is a lengthy pause as they are both too moved to continue. Although he has mentioned that past incident a number of times previously, never before did he disclose its emotional impact on him until now.

‘Again, you are the reason you’re alive. I only assisted —’

‘Whatever,’ he interrupts her. ‘This isn’t about me. You’ve already gone through hell mourning those kids’ death. Then let them be what you thought they were. It’s best for everyone that way.’

Soo is in a pensive mood. 'Please, at least tell me which ones ... or how many you were able to save. Has there been any permanent injury or disability to any of them? Who's in charge of them now? Have any been adopted? Answer me, please. I'm dying to know, or else I wouldn't be coming here, begging a *namahram*, and sinning like this.'

'Those I was able to save are okay, but don't ask anything more. For your own good, the less you know and the sooner you get them out of your mind the better.'

'Is this another weapon of yours to punish me with and to make me feel guilty about marrying my cousin in a religious, traditional way, and not saying yes to the notorious Joe Raad, who by the way happens to be my father's worst nightmare? Have you not been familiar with my circumstances? So much for a chivalrous knight, torturing a shattered woman like this!'

'No, and leave your father out of this, because surprisingly he is not the most impenetrable barrier in this whole —'

'Just because he now knows who you are, doesn't mean he'd be okay with —'

'Just drop it, will you? It's all about *you* wanting something and choosing the opposite, hoping for a miracle to make amends between the two extremes, and ending up running back and forth between the two, and feeling miserable. And you *had* your chance to be saved. I would've done anything to that end, without even asking you to sin, but you chose not to. You *still* choose not to, do you not?' He searches her face for any reaction, but she only looks away. 'I rest my case. I've got nothing more to say.' He starts heading out.

'Fine, go,' she cries quietly. 'Of all the times I begged you to stay away and leave me alone, *now* is your time to leave me in this hell and walk out.'

He stops with a sigh and turns around, looking sorry.

'You were right. You won like you said you would, whereas I lost everything. Even if nothing physical happened, you finally got what you wanted and ruined me in the process, something I will never recover from. You took

away my soul. You took away my investments for afterlife and all that I had worked so hard to hold on to. And yes, I admit, you took away my heart.'

Joe can't help but to stare at her, looking deeply touched and dazzled by her honest confession.

She continues, 'And you were absolutely right about something else too. I *did* pay the price – and a tremendously heavy one too – for being in the wrong place at the wrong time with you ten years ago. I've got nothing left of me now to offer my husband except for an empty, worthless shell. Nor do I have the face or grace in front of my Creator anymore. So congrats! You can proudly add another win to your straight victories.'

His face shows a mixture of remorse and astonishment. 'I don't see how watching the woman you'd die for, hand herself to the wrong man can be a victory. I can't say I'm sorry for the way our fate brought us together again. I had the privilege of getting to know not just a remarkable soul I had longed for but also a goddess, who means more to me than life itself, because she is who she is. And it's got nothing to do with whether or not anything physical did or will ever happen between us. And I wish to God she wasn't as beautiful on the outside too. Things would have been much easier for me that way.'

A few knocks at the entrance interrupts him. Jamshid sends the newcomers away, telling them to use the parking gate.

Joe continues, 'I'm sorry, however, for all the pain this journey has caused her and me as well, and for that I hope she forgives me. But it's she who's indecisive and stuck between her heart and her brain. It's she who's thinking she will sin and fall from grace if she breaks the cultural norms by choosing the man of her dreams. It all comes down to her. Still, I will always protect and support her with all my power till the day I die, no matter what.' He turns around and heads to the door.

She runs after him. 'Please wait.'

Joe stops again.

She brings out from her purse a small plastic bag containing a *tasbeeh*, an ointment, and a small bottle of drops. 'These are some very vital things for

Parvaneh, Saeed, and Maryam. Please take this bag, and don't say anything. Please don't you say a word, even if the three children I named are not among the ones you've saved. I want to keep on believing that they're still alive,' says Soo, sniffing and near tears. 'Parvaneh just started teething two months ago, and chewing on my *tasbeehs* seemed to soothe her aching gums.'

Joe's eyes are becoming just as teary, and so are Jamshid's. He has put the magazine down and is holding a tissue at the bridge of his nose, and looking away at the yard door.

Soo continues in a shaky voice, 'Saeed gets this horrible nappy rash, which becomes worse with ordinary rash medication. I had a relative send this from Germany. God willing, it will work. And this bottle contains my grandmother's special colic remedy, the only thing that can calm Maryam down when nothing else can.' She hands him the bag. 'And lastly, please forgive me for my inconsiderate outburst. No one could have done what you have for those orphans.'

She turns around to leave, but then stops.

'My God, what am I thinking? I must be truly losing my mind.' She leans on the wall next to her for support. 'How would you know which child is which? You don't know their names, and they're too young to know their identity. The carers had been too busy lately to keep the babies' ID tags on them.' She slides down the wall and sits on the ground.

Joe pulls the chair near her and asks Jamshid to get her some water and sweets. 'You're not well. Do you want me to call a doctor or an ambulance?'

Jamshid comes running. They offer her a glass of water and some pastry on a tray.

She shakes her head but manages to sit on the chair. 'I need to give you these children's physical description in order for you to —'

'Just stop, okay?'

'Is this your way of telling me that ...? Please whatever you do, don't tell me those three are not with you. I'd go completely insane. I don't even mind if you lie to me and tell me they are alive and well. I'm begging you, in fact, to lie if

you have to, to save me. That's how desperate I am, and how far off I've fallen from my Lord's proximity.'

'They're alive and well. And I *will* take this bag to them, if it's the last thing I do. I promise you. But you've never looked this pale. You need to have something or you'll pass out.'

Soo shakes her head again. 'I can't, but I'll be alright.'

'Oh, for the love of God, are you *fasting*?' He puts the tray away and holds his head in frustration. 'It's obvious. Why do I even bother asking?' he mutters.

'What else is left for me to do to reach God? I have exhausted all other means to no avail. I never thought I'd become this sinful.' She gets up.

'Then at least rest in one of the rooms until you can eat something. It's only an hour till *azaan*. And I will stop the music and everything. You're not well enough to leave now.'

But Soo unlocks the outside door and steps out.

Joe turns to Jamshid who looks just as affected having witnessed everything. 'She won't accept a ride, and she doesn't want me to go after her. Get one of the guys to follow her at a distance to make sure she reaches home safely. But tell him not to come into any contact with her and notify me directly if anything goes wrong.'

'Right away, Joe,' says Jamshid, rushing into the yard.

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Whether to doubt Joe's honesty about sending his grandmother, or to doubt Rasool's trustworthiness in the promises he has made, is no longer a tough call for Soo. Yet it is a dilemma as there is no victory or defeat here, only pain and agony. The likelihood of Joe being right, which is what her heart is telling her is the case, has left Soo heartbroken at the bitter reality of the future awaiting her in her married life with Rasool. But most importantly, there is no denying that Joe has won her heart and she hasn't got a clue how to stop her fast approaching wedding now that she is head over heels in love with the forbidden man.

She reaches home around 6:30, minutes after *azaan*. Her family members are present and so is Rasool who has visible signs of irritation because of her cancelling their outings today. Shireen brings her a small tray of what Soo normally eats as *eftaari* – milk and dates with some bread, walnuts, feta cheese, and green herbs – until they all have their family dinner later between eight and nine pm. But she doesn't sit and only has a sip of the milk to break her fast, while giving unfriendly looks to Rasool.

He approaches her, carrying a foreign bridal-gown catalogue his mother and sisters have sent her to consider and choose from, having already circled their own favourites with a red marker. But Soo is in a different world. She closes the catalogue fiercely, and tells everyone about the messenger without revealing who she has seen today. She then shoves Rasool in the chest with the catalogue, which ends up on his feet, and accuses him of keeping such critical information from her.

‘What!?’ gasps Khanom Jaan, slapping herself in the face.

Shireen gets a red flush all over and puts the tray down before her shaky hands lose grip of its handles.

Soo continues, ‘If you couldn't keep your promise to me, if it was too much for you to handle, I expected you to be a man about it and tell me outright, whereas you preferred to keep hiding your true character, and let me suffer in the process.’

Ebrahim sends Salman and Sara to their rooms and faces Rasool. ‘Is Soo right? What is she talking about?’

Rasool picks up the catalogue and starts rolling and twisting it in his hands vigorously. ‘First of all, it should be me complaining, not her. And don't get me wrong. I adore and cherish my wife. But, putting aside the way she has ignored and cancelled the two important things we had to do today, causing much humiliation to me and my family, I'm very disappointed that she has been doing things behind my back and keeping me in the dark. Secondly, what she's accusing me of is all a big misunderstanding.’

‘Then answer me and make all the clarifications you need. Did that woman come to our door with such a message or not?’ asks Soo.

‘Why don’t you tell everyone about the secret things you’ve been —’

‘Quiet!’ Khanom Jaan snaps at them. She comes and stands near the couple, looking like a serious referee, with her fists on her hips and her head bent forward. ‘You’ll get your turn, Rasool. Let’s deal with one thing at a time. Start answering her question about the messenger.’

‘Alright, yes, there was such a messenger, but how could you expect me to believe anything an old, wrinkly, and inaudible woman said? She could hardly walk or talk, let alone make any sense.’

‘I have met this person. She is a tall, healthy-looking, and bright woman in her seventies with rosy cheeks and a big smile. She also happens to be articulate and quite vibrant for her age. God help us, Rasool,’ says Soo, bringing out her small Qur’an from her purse and holding it in front of him. ‘Hopefully from now on, there will be less sinning in this talk.’

‘As the most honest of all Rustins, perhaps you’d want to first tell everyone present here who you’ve gone to see today that has turned you against me, or whose picture you’ve seen yesterday you’re not telling us about?’

‘I already told you I’ve sworn to secrecy about his iden—’

‘I said hold your horses, Rasool, and for the last time just answer her first,’ Khanom Jaan reminds him again with an angry tone of voice. ‘Was that woman really as disabled as you’re portraying her, or —’

‘Okay, she was articulate,’ Rasool cuts in, ‘but since Soo had already gone through the whole grief phase, I thought it would be best not to jolt her again and get her hopes up over an unreliable piece of information.’ He then faces Soo. ‘You had become weak and fragile for the past few weeks. Such contradicting news could have harmed you even more.’

‘But apparently this message was sent eleven days ago, upon our arrival from Khoy, just when she was hospitalised again, thinking all the infants were dead,’ says Ebrahim with a frown. ‘The worst part of her devastation started from that day onwards. You saw her on that hospital bed in such a condition and even later at home for eleven days. You watched her nearly lose her mind over those kids and you kept such vital information to yourself? I consider myself a fair and

unbiased person, but unless you have a very good reason, I find what you've done totally unacceptable and unjustifiable.'

'I am sorry, but please, *Amoo Jaan*, don't make a big deal out of nothing.' The pressure of his sweaty hands is about to rip apart the catalogue cover.

Rasool tries to justify his action by explaining that on that day, after a brief visit to their rug gallery, he had just arrived at his uncle's house and heard what had happened to Soo outside. He had found out that his uncle and aunt had rushed to the hospital, and he was just about to go to the hospital himself when the old woman rang the doorbell. Under such circumstances it was only natural not to believe what an old stranger was saying over what Soo herself had apparently discovered from a far more reliable source, a former carer at a new orphanage. 'If you were me who would you've believed?'

'It wasn't for you to make that decision,' says Soo. 'Your job was to transfer the message which would have made a whole lot of difference to me.'

'But how? What were you going to do, and how were you going to benefit from that? She didn't introduce herself or give any names or details that could be a lead or a trace to further follow up.'

'Did you ask her for those details?' asks Ebrahim.

'Yes, but she said she was only a messenger. And as articulate and bright as Soo thinks she is, the nonsense she said afterwards took away any credibility in what she was saying.'

'That wouldn't have mattered. Either nonsense or fact, I was desperate for any good news, for any hope. Besides, the slightest truthful information about her appearance, like her height and her blue eye-colour, would have identified her to me.'

'You say you've met this woman. Who is she?' Ebrahim asks Soo.

'I can't tell you who she is for the same reason I couldn't tell you about the man in the picture.'

'You see? She is doing it again in front of everyone,' complains Rasool.

Something else hits Soo and she returns her puzzled face to Rasool. 'What exactly do you mean by nonsense?'

'I mean how high would you rate a woman's sanity and mentality level when she suddenly switches the topic from infants, orphanage, and fire to – as far as I can remember – chewing gums and engines?'

'Dear God!' gasps Soo.

'I told you it was nonsense,' says Rasool with confidence. 'It went something like a chewing gum fixing a cracked engine part.'

Soo's eyes get teary. She covers her mouth and turns around. 'The coded sentence he was talking about,' murmurs Soo as she walks towards the window. 'He was right about everything.' She sits on the floor next to the window with her back to Rasool.

Shireen follows her with the rest of the milk and makes her drink it, while Khanom Jaan starts massaging Soo's back and shoulders, telling Shireen to give her the dates too.

Rasool apologises for the pain he has unintentionally caused Soo, saying he only meant to make life easier for her. 'I accept that it was wrong, but you must give me some credit for the circumstances.'

Instead, he is given the silent treatment for a while.

Soon he goes back to pushing forward his own argument to turn the tables on Soo, and gain some sympathy for himself. 'If I'm allowed to have my turn now, Khanom Jaan, I'd like to know how she has found out about the messenger.' He faces Soo. 'You've either been in contact with the old woman today – which is very unlikely – or seen the sender of the message, which is what my instincts are telling me you've done. There is just no other way to this discovery.'

'I don't see how that can justify what you've put me through,' says Soo.

'It will at least reduce the gravity of the shame and blame that's coming my way from all directions.'

'What are you trying to imply?' asks Ebrahim.

‘You be the judge, *Amoo Jaan*, and tell me if I’m wrong. Yesterday she came in with this big happy news about seeing such a life-changing picture, and today she is giving me the third degree about that old woman. It’s obvious that the sender of the message was the man she saw in the photo yesterday, the so-called rescuer she is determined not to name. He’d obviously be the first person she’d go to for any information about those kids, and I have no doubt that she’s just returned from seeing him. How else could she have found out?’

‘Is he right, Soo?’ asks Ebrahim.

Rasool continues, ‘Of course, I am, Uncle. And please don’t take this as jealousy or suspicion from my side. My wife means the world to me, and I have no doubt about her piety and faithfulness. But surely you understand that no Muslim man wants to see his wife in touch with a *namahram*, no matter how God-fearing she and the other party might be.’

‘How did you find out about this messenger?’ Ebrahim asks Soo.

All eyes turn to Soo.

‘I went to see the man in the picture, who had sent her.’ Soo’s confession comes as a disappointing blow to her family. ‘I know going there was a *gonah*, but there was no other sinning. I didn’t speak to him in private. And I went alone, because I knew none of you would support me or accompany me there. Plus, I couldn’t take anyone with me. I had made a promise to the newspaper headquarters to keep his identity confidential. I swear it was my constant anguish about those kids along with the terrifying nightmares I had last night that forced me to go there. I had to find out how they were. Please understand that I didn’t choose to feel this way about them.’

‘We do. Still, that is no excuse for what you’ve done,’ says Ebrahim. ‘I thought you understood that the best thing for your emotional health was to avoid any contact with the orphans, and yet you’ve gone to find out more about them? You’re a Muslim woman who’s also married. Your husband has every right to know who you see, meet, or socialise with. You had no right going to see a stranger, a *namahram* all alone on your own and behind your husband’s back, no matter how devastated you were because of those kids.’

Rasool picks up his raincoat from the coat rack, but before he leaves his pleading eyes turn to his grandmother, hoping to raise more support for himself. 'Khanom Jaan, you still haven't said anything. You must surely understand where I'm coming from.'

'I'm not saying what Soo did was right, but you saw how worried we all were about her wellbeing. You knew how desperately your uncle was looking for a proficient specialist for her, at a time when most of them had fled the turbulent country. She cried so much that I was sure she'd soon go blind. Even if the message was a lie, or the messenger insane, even if there was only a bit of hope that a single infant had survived, it would have saved her all that suffering. You've certainly shocked us with what you've done to your wife.'

'I said I was sorry. You know what Soo means to me. She is a dream come true, and I will never intentionally hurt her.'

Ebrahim looks appalled and fed up. 'We've heard enough. I hate to interfere in something which is between a man and his wife, but is this what life will be like between the two of you, both going behind each other's backs and keeping secrets from one another?' asks Ebrahim, with eyes that are running between the couple.

He continues, 'As for you, Rasool, I find no rationale in your explanation for what you did. But luckily you happen to have the most forgiving Rustin as your wife, who will hopefully see this whole unfortunate incident from a different perspective. And you, Soo, whether or not your husband will come to terms with what you've done, you need to answer to God eventually, and He sees no life-and-death situation in the sin you've committed, and all without your husband's consent.'

Ebrahim picks up his old Qur'an from the mantelpiece, and leaves the lounge room, saying he has no appetite for dinner and asking Soo to come to his study once she has had her *eftaari*.

Khanom Jaan pulls Rasool's arm and takes him into the corridor away from the rest of the family. 'I'm not here to discuss her wrongdoing, which by the way is far more justifiable than the argument you put forth.' She gathers her thoughts as she swallows. 'I am not sure what her pre-nuptial conditions are, but after what

she said I am pretty sure it is something to do with those orphans. Whether it is her future volunteer work or guardianship or adoption or whatever, the only possible explanation to me is that you wanted her to think all those kids were dead, so much so, that you didn't care what that would do to her. You took the easiest way out of a promise you couldn't keep.'

'Oh, for heaven's sakes, no, that's not —'

'You think that father and daughter are stupid? What else does it look like, except that you intentionally chose to let her mourn for as long as it took, because you preferred to watch her grieve rather than let her know you are not man enough to keep your promise.'

'No, and I resent that, Khanom Jaan. You of all people should know that I intend to keep all my promises, every single one I've made to her. I am a Rustin, for crying out loud.'

'Very well. If you really mean what you're saying, then go back in there and tell her that. And I'll talk to your uncle, but if you slip again you'll be digging your own grave, because the only reason Soo finally agreed to this marriage was that you accepted her terms and conditions. And be warned that as precious as you are to this family, the Ebrahim I know will never hand the apple of his eye to an untrustworthy son-in-law who is not a man of his word.'

After going back to the living room and begging for Soo's forgiveness, Rasool leaves the disturbed household.

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Later in Ebrahim's study, the anguished father is in deep thought, pacing the floor on which poetry and literature books along with his students' exam papers have partly covered the burgundy colour rug as well as his desk.

'May your fasting be accepted by God, though I still think you shouldn't continue,' he says, putting his holy book on his desk as Soo knocks and enters with a tray of tea.

'Thank you, Dad.'

'Is he gone?'

‘Yes, he further apologised to me after you came upstairs, and promised that it would never happen again.’

‘I pray to God that this is the last time I become aware of any problems between you two.’

‘I’m so sorry you had to witness all that, Dad.’

She places the tray on his desk as he keeps pacing, holding his hands behind him.

‘I haven’t forgotten the circumstances under which you accepted your cousin’s proposal. There was the ultimatum from me, then your uncle Mostafa’s false announcement, and so on.’ He considers himself a not-so-bad judge of character, and he believes that Rasool was and still is the best among all her suitors. But she needs to realise that the key to a successful marriage is compromise, or even sacrifice at times. As they say, *arguments, quarrels, and misunderstandings are the flavours in a married life, like salt and pepper added to a dish*. He knows she had certain terms and conditions all of which Rasool apparently accepted, but she must be ready and willing to embrace whatever the future might bring to her, regardless of what she thought life would be, or what Rasool has promised and signed on a piece of paper. No one is perfect and neither is Rasool.

‘I know exactly what you mean.’

‘The whole community and everyone we know are aware of your engagement and marriage to Rasool. Moreover, I posted over two hundred fifty invitation cards yesterday – and that’s only from *our* side of the family.’ He won’t go into details about all the other preparations and planning for this wedding. Everyone expects a dignified and stately ceremony worthy of their name and stature, in accordance with their religious and traditional beliefs and rites, and not to mention worthy of a noble girl like her.

‘I’m humbled by your kindness, but I’m really no one to —’

‘Having said all that,’ he interrupts her, ‘it is your life and future we’re talking about, and nothing – and I mean not a single thing – in this world is as important to me as your happiness.’

They share a moment. He hands her a framed black-and-white photo which he always keeps on his desk. It's him in his early twenties with a small infant wrapped in a baby-blanket in his arms.

'If you're trying to make me cry, I am already halfway there, Dad.'

'I'm sure you know the story behind this photo.'

'And who doesn't? You've told it to us dozens of times. This is my very first photo, taken on the day I was born, and this is the first time you ever held me in your arms.'

'Yes, but that's not all. You can also see in the photo my Qur'an with me, the one I still have.' He picks up the same Qur'an from his desk to show her. 'Looking at this breathtaking newborn, I also took an oath on this holy book to never become a dictator to my children, or act the way our patriarchal culture prescribes to men. I promised myself to model our holy prophet's affectionate and loving demeanour in dealing with my kids. I realise that I will never be —'

'You're far better a father than what you dreamed to be.'

They are both holding back tears.

'What I'm trying to ask you is that ... are we all good to go ahead with this wedding? Because if you're not ...' He cuts himself short, waiting for her reply, while giving his daughter the most serious stare ever.

Soo has a heavy lump in her throat but manages to utter through her lips what her heart is not saying, 'Yes'.

## Chapter 11: Wedding

The long-awaited day of Soo and Rasool's wedding is intentionally set to coincide with one of the holiest, most celebrated days on the Islamic calendar, *mab'as*, the anniversary of the day in which Prophet Mohammad became the messenger of God. As it is also a sunny spring day around mid-April – when Tehran's flowers are at their most abundant and its weather at its fairest – it is a perfect day for a dream wedding. Yet, the bride's heart is at its gloomiest.

Soo, along with a few close female relatives, has been in a beauty salon all morning, where a professional beautician and her assistants and apprentices have spent hours giving the bridal group the best makeover possible. It is now around three pm, and Rasool and his best men have arrived in three cars to take the women back to Ebrahim's house where the celebration will be held. The heavily made-up and dressed-up bride, with a white veil that covers all her beauty underneath, is accompanied outside the salon, looking more like a tall, faceless, and armless snowman. She is then led by Rasool in to *mashine aroos*, Rasool's fancy Mercedes especially decorated on the outside with fresh flowers, ribbons, and lace. And as the bridal car starts sounding its horn and leads the way, the best men and the rest of the women follow in the other two cars.

Soo wipes the inside of her eyes with a tissue, before her tears get a chance to ruin her makeup.

'Sweetheart, I know you'll miss your father's household, but we'll only be a twenty-minute drive away from your family. Besides, it's not like you're entering a stranger's home,' says Rasool, behind the wheel.

In Ebrahim's house, a few hundred guests have been invited to share the historic event with the Rustins until late at night. The drawing room accompanies the female guests, while the men are seated on the chairs out in the open front yard. And the kids are being kids, running in and out, and high on sugar, feasting on a wide variety of sweets available.

The house door and the yard are adorned and ornamented with fairy lights, and so are the walls and trees nearby in the alley. As the guests and the hosts hear the beeping bridal car and the happy ululation of the new arrivals, they all get up

to begin their merrymaking, clapping hands and whistling to welcome the bride and groom. Five sheep are slaughtered right outside the door by the local butcher and his assistants as Soo and Rasool step out of the bridal car. One will be donated to charity, and the rest will be cooked for the dinner reception tonight. A loud recitation of *salawat* follows by everyone present, '*Allahomma salle ala Mohammad va ale Mohammad!*' asking God to bestow peace upon Mohammad and his household. Khanom Jaan raises a Qur'an up high at the yard door for the couple to pass under as they enter the yard, and they do, after kissing the holy book, hoping for God's protection in their married life. Shireen has the smoking *esfand* on a tray to protect them from evil eyes. Sara, Tahmineh, and a few other women, including their cousins and Rasool's sisters, shower the bride and groom with sweets, throwing handfuls of small bits of *noghl* and candies on their heads, as well as shiny coins, believed to bring sweetness and affluence to the couple's life.

A team of four photographers – two men and two women booked and hired in advance – have already set up their equipment in the men's as well as the women's section to immortalise the event. After taking some group and family photos in the yard, Soo heads slowly to the drawing room where women are awaiting her, all the while careful of the children at her feet wiggling and squirming around to collect the sweets and coins off the ground. Rasool, meanwhile, goes to greet and welcome the male guests in the yard, some of whom are dancing in honour of the newlyweds.

Khanom Jaan does her slow dance all the way, with her veil wrapped and tied around her waist and her ample gold accessories jingling, until the bridal group reaches the drawing room. Soo's white veil is taken off her head and she is seated on her designated bridal chair, where she watches in shyness and sorrow hundreds of staring and admiring eyes zoom in on her, celebrating the most miserable day of her life. While the merrymaking continues, she is deep in a pensive state of how the walls have closed in on her and what awaits her tonight.

Soon, a boy's loud call at the yard door announces a visitor's request to see the father of the bride, and takes Ebrahim, who hasn't been in the best of moods today, away from his surrounding guests.

Last night he dreamt of his deceased fiancé, Leily, whom he loved dearly but lost in a car accident before their wedding. Over twenty years of these random encounters with the love of his life have proven to him that she only pays such visits to warn him in advance about an imminent ominous event, though it is never clear what it might be. That's how much she still loves him and cares about his wellbeing, he believes. As such Ebrahim hasn't been himself today in anticipation of what might go wrong, and is taking all the preventive measures he can think of. But that's not all. Something more hazardous is on his mind. What if the wedding itself is the adversity Leily intended to warn him about?

He steps out in the alley. The butcher and his assistants have finished handling the meat and are busy washing the blood stains off the pavement. But Ebrahim's attention is immediately diverted to a motorbike-rider with a brown leather jacket and matching pants and boots. Not only his physique but also the ends of his blond hair that are sticking out of the helmet reveal his identity to Ebrahim even before he takes his helmet off. He dismounts his bike but stays there with his eyes on the host. Ebrahim takes a few seconds to approach him.

'*Salaam*,' says Joe, pushing his hair back and adjusting the black headband on his forehead.

'*Asr be kheir*. Good afternoon,' replies Ebrahim.

'I've stopped by to thank you for sending me the invitation card. I'm sure it couldn't have been an easy thing for you to do.'

'I'd be lying to you if I say it was, or that I wasn't shocked to find out who you were the other day, but then —'

A few passers-by stop momentarily to say *mobarak baad* and congratulate Ebrahim on the occasion and continue on their way.

He turns to Joe again. 'But then I had to prove – more to myself than to anyone else – that I was a man of my word. Besides, regardless of our past, how can anyone hold a grudge against someone to whom they owe their life?'

The two share a long look.

'About the past you're referring to, if it's any consolation, although I was known as a troublesome jerk back then, I swear I only carried your daughter on

my back because she needed help. My intention was merely to save her. True, to some people I still am an outlaw and a wrongdoer, and I do end up in jail every now and then, but I only do wrong for the right reason and only when it is absolutely necessary. I want you to know that I will never ever hurt you or your family.'

'I know that now and appreciate it. This is no place to receive a guest. Why don't you come inside and join us? I will only introduce you as the engineer Yousef Raad. I'm sure my family would also —'

'That's highly generous of you, but I'd better go.' He unzips his jacket halfway, just enough to bring out a flat rectangular-shaped box, wrapped in gift paper with pink and blue stripes. 'If you please accept this wedding present, I'll be on my way.'

Ebrahim is thankful but expresses his reluctance, especially since Joe has refused to come to the wedding.

Joe nonetheless hands him the box, stating that he won't take it back. 'Unless you want the hard feelings to linger any longer than they have between us, you won't refuse it.'

A minibus full of new guests stops near them, interrupting their talk. Ebrahim sends them inside but notices some of the women's eyes on Joe and the way he is turning heads. Joe looks uncomfortable, turns his face towards his bike, and gets back on it.

'Very well,' continues Ebrahim, looking at the present, 'but it is in fact me who still owes you. That day you had *two* things you wanted to ask me, but you only —'

'Mr Rustin, you've got a lot of guests in there waiting for you. This is no time to be holding you up outside for anything, let alone for a matter which ... the great poet Shahriar would have likened to *nooshdaroo ba'd az marge Sohrab*, an antidote reached after Sohrab's death. I'm sure you're familiar with the famous story in Ferdowsi's epic, *Shahnameh*.'

'Yes. But I'm afraid I don't quite grasp your reference to that poem. What is it that's too late to be undone now?'

‘It doesn’t matter anymore,’ says Joe, putting his rider’s gloves back on. ‘That said, I also had another reason for this visit. Unfortunately, it isn’t what you want to hear. It will also sound inappropriate coming from me, who is not in the position to be making judgements about your household, but ... your nephew is not the right man for your daughter.’

Ebrahim looks frozen, mouth agape in astonishment.

‘Believe me. I know what I’m talking about, and I only have your family’s best interests at heart.’

‘Son, the chefs need your advice and the guests are looking for you. Where did you disappear to?’ says Khanom Jaan, finding her way in the busy alley towards the two men, with her astonished eyes zeroing in on her son’s unknown visitor.

Joe takes off, leaving behind the already-anguished Ebrahim in much thought.

‘*Masha Allah, masha Allah!*’ Khanom Jaan expresses her admiration for the stranger, checking Joe out some more as he rides away, having let go of the bike handles and putting his helmet back on. ‘Is everything alright? Who *was* that astonishing, handsome young man?’

Ebrahim is in a different world.

‘Was he for real? Or is it the happy occasion that is making me see imaginary things? Answer me, Ebrahim. Why didn’t you invite him inside, instead of chatting with him here?’

‘Let’s just go back inside.’ He turns her shoulders around. ‘We’ll talk later, Mother.’

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In the women’s section, Soo is still on the same bridal chair watching the guests take turns dancing, or merely eating, drinking, and chatting, but hardly failing to avert their eyes from her for more than a few seconds. Among the non-stop dancers is her mother-in-law, Ameneh, with her repetitive announcement of a

hopeful – yet near impossible – wish, asking God to grant the newlyweds seven sons and then a daughter with Soo's looks.

Soo's elders, who are mindful of her health, keep bringing different edibles to boost her energy level, and although Soo seems cooperative, her sister sitting next to her comes in handy to finish off what Soo can't force down. Considering the long and tiring day ahead, the bride is ordered to break her steady fasting today. They had Rasool use his power as the husband to forbid her from it, convincing her that no bride in her right mind would fast on such a day, and that there is a limit even to piety. Moreover, they have all been particularly concerned about her lack of strength to tolerate the consummation of marriage on her wedding night.

Tahmineh, sitting next to Soo, elbows her. 'Would you at least put a pretend smile on your face, every now and then? My God, I've never seen you or a bride this sad in my entire life. Is it the wedding night that's bugging you?' she whispers.

'I'd much rather be crawled all over by an alligator than ...' replies Soo with a sigh. 'And it isn't just that. It is also the rest of my days and nights ahead.'

'I can't help you with the rest of your life, but they say covering your face with a pillow can be a big help for tonight. Then again, with you it won't work. You're too pretty. He won't let you cover your face through it.'

Soo gives an annoyed look to her friend who starts laughing at her misery.

As others have done, the newly arrived group of women approaches the bride with the usual formality: complimenting her on her incredible looks and wishing her their best for her future life. They then find an empty spot to sit. However, among them, three excited girls continue their chat with Soo, enquiring about a stunning yet unknown young man they have seen outside talking to her father.

'What!?' Soo gasps and exchanges a look with Tahmineh when their description of the man fits only Joe. She is shocked at why Joe would show up there to speak to Ebrahim.

While Tahmineh keeps quiet, Sara has heard enough about this attractive young man to chitchat and joke around for hours if only time and place would allow, saying they must be hallucinating, most likely because of an allergic reaction to heavy make-up, otherwise such a ravishing man couldn't have possibly fallen out of a fairytale book and ended up at their door step.

To prove their point, the girls pull Sara to the window behind Soo's chair where they try to take another peek at Joe from behind the curtains.

'Maybe if we're lucky, he is still there in the alley. He was standing next to a huge motorbike. You wouldn't believe us unless you saw him for yourself,' says one of the girls to Sara.

'I know all my brother's and my father's friends,' says Sara. 'I'm telling you we didn't expect such a guest or visitor.'

Other women start telling them off, worried that by moving the curtains, the drawing room full of women without their veils will be visible to the men in the yard.

Sara tugs at the girls' dresses, making them sit.

'Even if he is gone,' says the second girl, 'we can always ask Agha Ebrahim for the name and details of the prince charming.'

'Are you kidding me?' says the third girl. 'Didn't you see the glare he gave us when he caught us checking out the hot bloke?'

The girls' adventurous thoughts and their naughtiness are interrupted when Shireen announces the commencement of the photoshoot in another room. With the thought of Joe overshadowing everything else Soo has on her mind, she had forgotten about the inevitable photoshoot, which to her serves no purpose, except to produce eternal visual evidence of the Rustin dynasty's biggest mistake for future generations. Yet, she has to be precise in following the pre-set rules and formalities step by step and all according to the prescribed traditions.

Soo's maids help her put her white veil back on, and she heads towards the adjacent room. A *sofreye aghd* is beautifully spread on the carpeted floor, containing their family Qur'an, a big mirror with two tall lamps in the shape of candlesticks, one on each side, two large sugar-cones wrapped in lace and

ribbons, a bowl of water, some honey, and other symbolic items, all believed to be tokens of good omen for the new couple. At the top of the *sofreh* sits a massive wedding cake with five square tiers.

As the nervous bride goes around the *sofreh*, the huge hem of her wedding gown knocks over the bowl of water, making the corner of the holy book wet. Their servants for the day take care of the spillage, and Soo's new Qur'an is brought down from her room to replace the wet one. This is the one Rasool's family gave her at their private engagement ceremony four months ago. As it turns out, under the hard cover of the same Qur'an Soo has kept her copy of the marriage certificate, along with her prenuptial terms and conditions.

Once each family has had their chance to be photographed with Soo, the women are asked to go back to the drawing room and allow Rasool to come in, so that the bride and groom can have their own personal wedding pictures taken privately. The thought of how to go through this phase is making Soo sweat all over. The *hejabi* women cover themselves up with their stylish wedding veils. After repeating the word *Ya Allah*, loudly announcing his entry and keeping his eyes on the floor, Rasool passes through the women's section, comes into the room, and locks the door behind him. The photographers ask Soo to take her veil off and get ready, but she declines.

Rasool is stunned. 'But we've had the same *sofreye aghd* and the same photos with you having your veil on four months ago. If you want to stay covered again what is the point of taking new pictures? These are supposed to be our intimate personal wedding pictures together.'

'I'm extremely nervous surrounded by hundreds of guests. Could we postpone it till later when we go to your house, please?'

'First of all, it isn't *my* house anymore. It is *our* house. Besides, the door is locked. No one is coming into this room. There are only the two of us and these two wonderful ladies who have done this dozens of times.'

Yet nothing he says convinces Soo.

'I'm sorry. I just don't feel comfortable enough right now to take my veil off. Please understand that.'

‘This is utterly ridiculous.’

He talks to the photographers, and they agree to stay longer and take the rest of the photos at the end of the wedding in his house. He then goes back to the yard looking irritated.

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An hour later, a tall, blue-eyed elderly woman, who has no prior acquaintance with anyone there, except for a one-off meeting with Soo and Rasool, shows up in the drawing room with a wedding invitation card in her hand.

‘My God, Ms Farah?’ says Soo, as the two hug.

Soo is just as amazed to see her there as Farah is to see how unbelievably stunning Soo looks. Her analytical eyes check her out from head to toe. ‘The last and only time I saw you, you looked like a man. But now, wow! I have never seen a bride this beautiful, nor did I think I ever could. God must have created you when He was in His absolute best of moods, or perhaps when He wanted to prove to Himself His utmost aesthetic ability in creation.’

‘Thank you, and I’m really nothing, especially since ... long story there,’ sighs Soo.

‘Based on what I’ve heard from ... someone, I can express my own as well as that person’s admiration of you for hours, but too bad, the place and timing can’t be worse.’ Farah lowers her voice and tells her she knows about her and Joe. She briefs Soo about the invitation card they have received as well as Joe’s earlier visit and chat with her father.

Soo is getting more uncomfortable by the minute.

‘I am also dying to say something now that I finally have the chance,’ Farah continues, ‘Believe it or not, I wanted to find out who you were and to meet you for years, but ...’

‘You did?’ whispers Soo, taken aback.

Farah nods, near tears. ‘But as hard as I tried he wouldn’t reveal your identity ... until today when he dropped this overwhelming bombshell connecting the past and the present. I can never thank you enough for saving his life in that

horrible street fight. I was the one contacted by the hospital and I nearly had a heart attack seeing how badly he was injured. I've never forgotten his exact words about you that a "crazy stubborn angel" is the reason why he stayed alive.'

'You don't need to thank me, and I can't take credit for that. He is the reason he stayed alive. When I got there he had already rescued himself. I merely expedited his transfer to the hospi—'

'Fine, whatever you say,' interrupts Farah, sniffing. 'That was in the past. What's important is your present and your future, and that's why I'm here on a mission.' She secretly gives Soo a folded letter from Joe and asks her to read it immediately. Luckily Sara and Tahmineh are too busy doing a group dance to hear their private talk.

Soo is just as surprised as she is touched. 'How can I possibly read this now, even if there would be any use in doing so? Look at the surroundings and where I am,' whispers Soo.

'It's never too late to stop a mistake. He is eagerly awaiting an answer from you, and I can't leave until I have it. I have raised and known him since birth. Just name it, and he'll move heaven and earth to get you out of this.'

After a headshake and a sigh, Soo excuses herself to use the bathroom, the only place she can think of that will offer her some privacy to read Joe's message:

*For the last time, don't do this! I know you too well to believe that you can wilfully hand yourself to a man you don't love. You may not have been aware, but your father has actually invited me and my family to the wedding. I came and spoke to him outside your house about an hour ago, and things look promising between me and him. He even asked me to come inside, which I declined. What I mean is that our circumstances have changed. You don't have to go through with this anymore. There is still time to undo this mistake. With your green light I can put an end to this nightmare, and I promise to make it as little awkward and demeaning as I possibly can. For once in your life just trust me and say yes. I'll await your response.*

She bursts into quiet tears which she has long been holding back. And it isn't just what's in his written message, but also what he has disclosed to his

grandmother about that past incident with the Saltman. The last thing she needs is more reason to hate her decision in what she is compelled to do today. 'I'm already crazy in love. I don't need to fall in love over and over again. Why do you do this to me and won't leave me alone? What am I to do with him, God?'

Her special preventive technique is again used to stop the flow of tears right where they start. She tries to get a hold of herself, puts Joe's note inside her white purse and goes back to the drawing room, where the guests increase the intensity of their clapping upon the bride's return. Tahmineh pulls her right into the centre of the dance circle, where she has no other option but to dance, something which she has repeatedly refrained from doing before. But to prevent any possible contact between her elders and Farah, she leaves the dance circle shortly. 'I have a new guest to attend to. You guys carry on.'

Farah's keenly expectant eyes follow Soo as she goes back to her seat. 'Forgive me for staring, my darling. But as annoying as his answer was, I now realise what he meant by *indefinable* when I pressured him to describe you.'

'Thanks again. I don't deserve all these compliments, and you're not making this easy,' says Soo, with a lump in her throat. 'Please tell him that I am beyond grateful for everything he has done and everything he attempts to do. And I do trust him with my life. But no, I need to do this, no matter what. I cannot put my family through such disgrace which will destroy our name and reputation.'

The two exchange a sorrowful look while Soo fights back tears.

'He'll be heartbroken, to say the least, and believe me the grandson I know is not going to give up on you, not again, and not ever. But it's your decision.' She gets up while pressing another piece of paper in the palm of Soo's hand. 'This one is from me. It has my address and phone number, just in case. Believe it or not, he has his own place to live. Remember that you're always more than welcome in my home.'

Farah leaves before the dance ends and is already out of the wedding when Sara and Tahmineh return.

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Rasool's mother, Ameneh, who was never thrilled about having been kept in the dark about Soo's prenuptial terms and conditions, is eager to try her luck one more time today. After the swap of the holy books at the photoshoot, she recognised the new Qur'an and spotted Soo's marriage certificate by its orange-coloured edges that were sticking out. At the right moment, she has gotten a hold of it and hidden it inside her garment. Not having much literacy, she takes her youngest daughter, the fifteen-year-old Narges, out of the drawing room and down to the basement to have her read it out to her in private.

As they tiptoe down the stairs, they find the basement just as crowded as the rest of the house, with the chefs, their assistants, and some servants busy preparing tonight's dinner. The rich aroma of meat, onions, turmeric, and saffron mixed with the dense vapour of boiling rice in huge pots has filled up the air, making it hard to see clearly through the hazy mist, yet as a last resort they are able to get into Khanom Jaan's special cellar designated for her dried-fruit stalks, homemade pickles, and jams. The cooking crew are surprised to find the mother and sister of the groom there of all the places and ask them with much respect and humbleness if they can be of any assistance to them, but Ameneh sends them back to their work, telling them all is fine.

Narges, oblivious to everything, can't find any rationale behind her mother's strange request, but Ameneh has no time or interest in answering her and only threatens her to keep everything about this, including what she is about to read, between the two of them.

A few minutes later, the reading is over. Ameneh is sitting on an old chest in the corner of the cellar, looking devastated and leaning her head against the wall. Narges has opened a jar of fig jam, out of which she is trying to feed some of the sweet stuff to her mother, whose face is numb, and whose eyes are fixed on the ceiling.

'Please, Mum, you're scaring me. Try to have some, or you'll faint.'

'Get Rasool here on the double, but don't let anyone else find out.'

In another five minutes, the groom has secretly rushed down to the basement. After sending Narges back to the celebration upstairs, he is taking in all that is coming to him from his disappointed mother. He argues against her worries

and concerns, trying to reassure her that all will be fine. Ameneh, however, doesn't seem to buy it.

'I wish I were dead and couldn't see the way you have degraded and devalued yourself and us. No bride in the world is worth this price. So what if there is no money involved! Your father and I and everyone else in our families have always wanted her to be your bride, just as much as you have, but if you had told us her wishes from the beginning, there was no way we would have allowed this marriage to take place.'

'Mum, please calm down.'

'What will people say? There will be no *aberu* left for us. We'll be the subject of ridicule and gossip among the community. Please tell me there is a way out of this, I will just die, Rasool, and so will your father,' cries Ameneh.

'I told you it is not what it looks like. Are you sure you don't want any water?' He rubs her hands.

'It is an official and binding contract. You have given her the right to divorce you whenever she feels like it.'

'Sure,' he says with sarcasm, 'like any Iranian girl, especially her of all people would be getting a divo—'

'Don't interrupt me, boy!' snaps Ameneh. 'You have further agreed not to ask her for any biological children, except for one, and that is whenever she wishes to. You have also granted her the freedom to adopt as many orphans as she likes. My God, what man in the right mind would consent to those?'

'I said I'll handle it, Mum. Just because it's written there, doesn't mean that's how it will be. Trust me on that. We have hundreds of guests out there who'll be looking for us soon, if not already. I am not going to waste my time on my wedding day explaining why I have signed her prenuptial. I wish to God you hadn't got your hands on this can of worms and let it stay hidden where it was.'

'You've made these promises to her. She is going to want you to live up to your promises.'

'No she won't. Leave Soo to me. Do you honestly think that a girl with her characteristics will turn her back on all her beliefs, culture, and traditions, and

bring shame to her family by getting a divorce from her husband, just because of some differences of opinion?’

‘These are different ways of living a shared life, not just some differences of opinions. No, she is not the type of girl to end her marriage over a trivial issue, such as an argument, bullying, or a mild case of domestic violence, but she *will* divorce you if her other two conditions are not met.’ Something else seems to hit her. ‘Wait a minute. My God, what are you implying, boy? Do you mean that you have no intention of keeping your promises to her?’

‘No, I ... I didn’t say that,’ he says, in a nervous tone. ‘I’m just saying she’ll change her mind.’

‘Listen to me. As your mother, my love for you can’t be compared to my affection and respect for Soo. But you can’t do this to her, or to yourself. If you’ve been dishonest in what you’ve signed, this marriage is doomed to fail.’

‘What a reassuring thing to say to your son on his wedding day!’

‘Whichever way you look at it, one of you will be hurt and that is not fair to either of you. She is marrying you thinking you’ll grant her all her wishes, whereas you are hoping she’ll change her mind once she loses her virginity to you and becomes second-hand goods. My God, Rasool, what has become of you? I can understand your years of yearning to lay your hands on the untouchable girl, but is jumping into bed with her such a —’

‘Stop it, Mum. This is as fair as any marriage can get. Of all her suitors, if there is one that can offer her the most, it’s me. So what if she finds some imperfections in what she has dreamed of having in her future?’ He explains that most teenage girls have this imaginary world pictured in their mind. It is only when they start living it in practical terms that it changes and becomes more realistic and reasonable. ‘And don’t get me wrong. I’m not being vicious or deceitful. I’m just saying she’ll make compromises to make this marriage work.’

‘Compromises are for trivial issues which can be resolved, not for such huge differences. The gap between what she wants and what you’re willing to offer her is too enormous to be bridged with compromises.’

‘She is too kind-hearted, forgiving, and generous not to go that extra mile to make her husband content.’

‘As angelic and everything else as she is, the Soo I know has also proven to be quite strong-willed, determined, and stubborn in fact, not to mention odd, unconventional, and eccentric.’ Ameneh reminds him of all the signs of awkwardness Soo has already shown them, like her steady fasting, her tomboy characteristics, her volunteer work, her majoring in sports, and the like. ‘What if she insists on getting what she wants?’

‘I promise you that she won’t.’

‘If these wishes weren’t important to her she wouldn’t have asked you to guarantee them in advance, and had them signed, sealed, and witnessed. I bet you her only reason for getting right of divorce is to make sure her other two wishes are respected. After all the years of waiting for her, can we tolerate a bride who’d be adopting other people’s children and not giving you your own?’

‘She didn’t say we won’t have any kids of our own. Besides —’

‘Well, what she has said amounts to the same thing. I wouldn’t be surprised if she took you to an adoption agency on your honeymoon. How are you going to stop her? Can you handle raising strangers’ children for years and years until God knows when she decides to have yours? You might be well in your forties or fifties, when others your age are raising their grandchildren.’

‘Mum! You’re blowing this way out of —’

‘And what if she has a girl? That’s the same as not having children. Rasool Rustin, the firstborn son of this dynasty, will end up an heirless old man with only a daughter, unable to carry on the family name. Is this the kind of future you’ve pictured for yourself and for us?’

‘No, it isn’t, and it won’t be like this, if you just stop overreacting. Although I never expected you to react this harshly, I totally agree with you. As soon as this bloody wedding is over and she moves into my home – that is if some people allow this wedding to proceed as planned – things will be different. I’ll gradually change her mind.’

‘But how?’

‘We can ... I don’t know ... perhaps become guardians to a few orphans on a temporary basis. Once she realises how much responsibility, commitment, and hard work is involved, she’ll give up.’

‘Don’t you think she is already aware of all that is involved? She worked for months in that orphanage under the worst of conditions.’

‘Maybe, but I’ll also have her own family’s support if she pressures me and becomes insistent. If they find out how irrational and impractical her wishes are, they’ll tell her off and convince her otherwise. They have always been against her spending all that time in that orphanage. Moreover, Uncle Ebrahim and his family are just as eagerly waiting as we are for the birth of our biological child. There is no way they will let Soo delay it, let alone sit there and watch all those extraordinary genes go to waste.’

There is a knock at the door and Narges’s head peeks out. ‘So sorry, *Dadash*. They need the car keys to move *mashine aroos*. Also some of the guests can’t stay for dinner and want to say goodbye.’

‘Are we good to go, Mum?’ asks Rasool, helping his mother get up.

Ameneh looks unconvinced and reluctant but wipes her face and nods before they all leave the cellar.

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On the surface, the evening goes as perfectly as planned, and regardless of Soo’s despair, what meets the public’s eyes is nothing less than an ideal wedding for a flawless couple. After the dinner reception around nine pm, those guests who haven’t planned on accompanying the bride and groom to their new home gradually leave the wedding, while the rest get ready to continue the celebration in Rasool’s house. As the majority of the female guests need to put their hijabs back on before they leave, heavy traffic is built up between the drawing room and the back rooms which are designated to serve as dressing rooms for the guests.

The bride and groom leave Ebrahim’s house with much the same rituals as they had entered hours ago, but this time with the bride’s immediate family members all in tears, feeling nostalgic about the separation of a loved-one from

her maiden dwelling and missing her already, although she will only be living in a nearby suburb.

Buses are waiting in the alley to transfer those guests who don't have their own vehicles, and soon the gleeful crowd follows the bridal car to the groom's house, all sounding their horns with an intermittent harmonious rhythm. The same extravagant reception continues in the groom's household with refreshments, fruits, drinks, sweets, and pastry, only this time hosted by Rasool's side of the family and for a shorter period of time.

The celebration comes to an end around eleven pm. The remaining guests say their farewells and head to the outside door, leaving behind the bride and groom with a handful of very close female relatives, who will stay at the newlyweds' home tonight to make sure the consummation of marriage takes place. The two female photographers, who still have some unfinished business to take care of, are present as well.

Soo is feeling more regretful than ever, hating herself and the reality that she has to hand herself to a man when her heart and soul are with another. Based on her beliefs, it is *haraam*, a sin for a woman to go to bed with her husband when thoughts of a stranger are in her mind.

While Rasool escorts the last guests to the door on the other side of the front yard, the women lead Soo to the master bedroom, all the while whispering to her their instructions, the dos and don'ts they believe any virgin bride should know. And as she listens with a blushing face to the embarrassing guidelines – some of which she finds nothing but baseless mythical or superstitious stuff anyway – what she hears is Joe's voice coming through his note in her purse, telling her not to go through with this.

The women settle her down on the turquoise satin and velvet covers of the bed, and she takes a look around the unfamiliar surroundings. Except for some of her belongings, which are still not unpacked in a couple of suitcases in a corner, everything else in the spacious room – furniture and all – is brand new. The elders have done the setting up of her dowry in her absence. She was asked numerous times prior to the wedding to visit her future home, but she had too many other things going on to worry about such terrestrial stuff as arranging some furniture in

Rasool's house. Besides, the more she got to know Joe and Rasool, the more she avoided the thought of living in that place.

The best of the flowers received by the hosts have been brought into the room to romanticise the atmosphere, along with candles and fragrant sticks of aloe and musk lit on the mantelpiece. Trays of food, refreshments, and snacks have been prepared in abundance, enough to last them a while, in case they prefer not to leave the bridal chamber for a few days. Except to allow the bride to take part in her *patakhti* – a ladies-only ceremony on the following day to celebrate the consummation of marriage – it is not unusual for the bride and groom to spend all their time together alone during the post-wedding period. Soo thanks the elders, and they leave the bedroom, reassuring her that they'll be right outside the door and waiting. Surprisingly, in spite of what everyone expected of the mother-in-law, Ameneh doesn't repeat her wish for the eight grandchildren before heading out. It is now the photographers' turn to approach Soo and get her ready for the private pictures she refrained from taking earlier. She, however, asks them in tears to wait outside for a short time until she can calm herself down.

Downstairs in the front yard, Rasool has his driver bring in the bridal car, and discharges the servants, all except for a full-time maid who is inside with the women. He closes the door behind the last guests, and after turning the decorative lights off, he heads back to the building, all the while heaving a sigh of relief. 'Finally,' he says, staring at his dimly illuminated bedroom upstairs, with a self-congratulatory smile on his face. Yet the smile doesn't last long. As he steps on the staircase to head to the nuptial chamber, a couple of hefty men, whose heads and faces are covered by beige-coloured stockings, leave their hiding place in the basement and catch him off guard from behind. The first thing he feels is his arms being grabbed from behind and a ball of stuffed fabric thrust into his mouth, preventing him from uttering any cry for help.

'Sorry, dude. You were this close,' says the shorter one of the two.

'But guess who's not getting lucky tonight?' says the second man.

## Chapter 12: Qazvin

A couple of hours later, at one in the morning, the two intruders, Fereydoon and Siamak, who are no longer wearing their head covers, are on their motorcycles, searching the suburbs surrounding Rasool's house.

For the fifth time, Fereydoon notices the flashing beam of red light coming from the radio hidden inside his inner pocket. He sighs. 'It's Joe again. What the hell do we do?'

'Do you seriously think he'll stop? Just give him the freaking news and get it over with,' says Siamak, looking upset. I swear if you don't *I will*, the next time he contacts *me*. Right now, no news could be worse to him than ignoring his calls. Besides, we need his advice on what to do from here on, anyway.'

Fereydoon heads towards a secluded area nearby. 'If he is so sensitive about this damn case, he himself should have taken it.'

'He already explained that for some complicated reasons, and also because he has had a prior encounter with the groom, he couldn't risk being seen by him again.'

Fereydoon answers the call and puts the radio on speaker. 'Just about to contact you, man,' he says with a pretend-happy tone. 'How's it going?'

'You were supposed to call me an hour ago.' Joe's yelling is heard on the radio. Fereydoon brings the volume down. 'Where in God's name are you? Did you get her out alright?'

'Well ... how can I put this ...?'

'My God. You'd better not have failed in such a simple mission as getting her away from him. If he has touched her, *be Khoda*, I swear to God I'll —'

'That's not what I meant,' he interrupts Joe. 'We don't know where she is.'

'Why the hell not? God help you if you —'

'Well, don't blame *us*. We could have crashed that wedding at any time. *You* were the one who was concerned about their name and *aberi* in front of their

guests and the neighbors, blah blah. *You* were the one telling us not to disturb the celebration and to wait till the very last moment just before they —’

‘I know what I said,’ Joe interrupts him, yelling even louder. ‘I need a straight answer. Did you or did you not get her out of there?’

Siamak snatches the radio from Fereydoon with a glare. ‘Hey, buddy. It’s me. She is out, alright ... but not in the expected way. She had already gotten herself out before we did anything.’

‘*What!?* What is that supposed to mean? What on earth went wrong?’

‘Nothing, at first. We took care of the groom in the yard, just before he went in the *hejleh*. We dragged him down to the basement, duct taped his mouth, and tied up his arms and legs with ropes. We then went upstairs in a civil manner, and told the women that we weren’t there to hurt anyone and asked them to stay calm and clear. Two female photographers were there too waiting to be called in by the bride to do the couple’s private photoshoot, which the bride had apparently postponed to the very last minute.’ Siamak sighs.

‘And?’

‘We knocked at the bedroom door and asked the bride to let us in. We told her we were on a mission to get her out of that house, but there was no reply. The door was locked. We broke in, but she wasn’t there. Everyone else was just as shocked to find out that she was already gone.’

‘How the hell could that be possible?’ asks Joe.

‘She had escaped through the bedroom balcony. We found some knotted sheets, hanging down from the balcony guardrail and her white wedding shoes outside the back door to the house.’

‘My God! Where could she be? Where are you *now*?’

‘On the streets looking for her, but so far nothing. She is nowhere to be found.’

‘Damn it! Keep looking everywhere. I’m on my way.’

Joe joins his men shortly, having brought with him a group of new helpers, consisting of about twenty of his undercover partners on their motorbikes. Once

he is briefed more thoroughly by his two friends, he gives instruction to the rest, and they start a more systematic search mostly in the nearby suburbs, and a few in other places of Tehran, such as the city's main bus terminals as well as the train station and the airport. However, even after two more hours of nonstop search, there is still no trace of Soo. The incoming updates from his partners via the radio are all indicative of the same bitter fact. The same goes with his frequent phone calls to his grandmother from the street phone booths. Farah has neither seen Soo, nor heard from her.

'Any news?' asks Teymoor, as Joe hangs up the phone and leaves a phone booth, with a long face, after making his ninth phone call to Farah. 'Don't fret. I'm sure wherever this bride might be, she is safe.'

'What a reassurance!' Joe mocks him with a sneer.

A few other bikers gather around them looking disappointed.

'Look, man,' says Siamak, stopping his bike in front of Joe before he gets back on his and goes off again. 'I can see how devastated you are. It seems you have some personal connections or whatever with this case, none of which are my business, but I think you're overreacting and —'

'And what?' says Joe. 'We should just call it a night and go home, or better yet, party?'

Siamak continues, 'It's not like you to be acting so irrationally. For the love of God, what is the matter with you?'

'Just shut up, will you?'

His other men concur with Siamak that it is time they stopped this futile search? The chances of finding her are next to nothing. They can't possibly search the entire capital city of Tehran. She could be anywhere and obviously has gone as far as she could from her husband's house.

Ferydoon too agrees that if a girl is as determined as she is to leave her husband on their wedding night, and is as outrageous as she is to plan such an escape, she won't be loitering around these suburbs. She'll do all she can to stay out of sight and out of reach to protect herself.

‘There *was* no prior planning. She’s done this on the spur of the moment,’ adds Joe.

The team members exchange glances.

Siamak reasons that by wasting time there, they’re only endangering the team. Surely, the groom has been released and is out of the basement by now. ‘He and his family are looking for the bride and us, as we speak. If we wait any longer, we’ll be dealing with their families, not to mention the cops.’

Joe is reflecting. ‘Besides her shoes, did you find her wedding dress or any other bridal accessories in the bedroom or anywhere else?’

‘No,’ replies Siamak.

‘Not a thing,’ confirms Fereydoon, ‘not even in the en-suite bathroom or the closets.’

‘Which means she is still wearing the damn white stuff.’ Joe holds the back of his neck, and starts pacing in front of the motorbikes. ‘A bride with her appearance all alone outside at this time of the night ... she will be a sitting duck. Millions of things can happen to her. Knowing her, she also has her veil on, or at least a sheet or something to cover herself.’

Joe’s men exchange another stunned look.

Joe continues to think and pace while running his hands through his stubble.

Teymoor pulls him to a corner and lowers his voice. ‘I know this bride. It is that veiled girl, that extra hot chick, isn’t it?’

‘Whatever you’re getting at, I’m not in the mood, nor do I have the time for it,’ says Joe with deep graveness.

‘She is that tall girl you brought as a man to Hashem’s house in that domestic violence operation, the girl you refused to talk about afterwards, the same veiled girl at our party house, the one I called you about, who was begging for some information about those kids.’

The two share a serious stare.

‘She is the girl you’re crazy in love with, isn’t she? You said she has your phone number and you never give out your number to girls.’

Joe shoots him a glare. 'We have an urgent situation on our hands, and you're prying into my personal life? One word of this to anyone else and I'll —'

'Fine.' Teymoor sighs, resting his hands on his hips. 'Let's put it differently. I have to agree with the team. It isn't at all like you to be reacting this way to an emergency. You'd never jeopardise the team's safety the way you are now, and it's all because you're acting upon your emotions and not thinking straight. I too think you should call off this search immediately. Having us all arrested is not going to help anyone. You've got a much better chance of hearing from her or from your grandmother if you're near your phone at home, in case she calls either one of you.'

Joe is finally convinced to release his crew, and they all head back, each going his own way.

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As for the missing bride, Soo gets out a cab just before midnight, having paid the cab fare with a gold ring, one of the many pieces of jewellery she has been given at her wedding. She sounds the doorbell to a house where Tahmineh's older sister Tahereh lives, the same home she had previously brought her friend the time she was drunk. Tahereh's mouth hangs open when she finds Soo in her wedding gown and a white veil on her head, barefoot at her doorstep, and immediately takes her in with open arms. Soo doesn't tell her much, except that it's a long story and apologises for the inconvenience, saying she couldn't think of any other place to go that would remain untraceable by her family.

Luckily Tahereh's husband is in another city on a work mission, and there is no one at home with her, except for her young children who are asleep. A phone call is made, and the much astounded Tahmineh, who had already left the wedding and gone to her parents' home for the night, is asked to rush to her sister's to see the runaway bride.

After washing off all her makeup and making *voozoo*, ablution, Soo asks for some ordinary clothes and permission to do her evening prayers, which are due before midnight.

Once Soo's prayers are done, the hostess brings a cup of tea for her. 'My goodness, do you always have to look unbelievable, and I don't mean your incredible looks?' She remembers the first time Soo showed up there, she was on a motorcycle, looking like a guy, and now she has come there in her wedding dress. 'What next? An astronaut's uniform?'

Her humour lights up Soo's petrified face with a slight smile, but it quickly disappears when they are interrupted by Tahmineh ringing the doorbell. Not long after, based on Soo's wish to leave Tehran as fast as possible, the two girls head to Qazvin city, where Tahmineh and her in-laws live. By the time they reach their destination, around three in the morning, Soo has had enough time during the two-hour cab-drive to tell everything to her friend, including Joe's involvement with her.

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Tahmineh's new home is a small house, which is considerably undersized for its eight residents, the Sabris. The girls settle down in the drawing room while Soo is petrified by what she has done, going against everyone and everything, except Joe and herself. Tahmineh covers her up with layers of thick blankets and a quilt to stop her shivers in the mild spring night.

'How about some tea or food to warm up your insides?' asks Tahmineh.

'Are you kidding me? I feel more like throwing up than swallowing anything.'

Tahmineh encourages Soo not to delay making the call to her parents, saying it will calm her down and reduce her feelings of guilt and anguish, just as much as it will benefit her family. She reasons that Rasool hasn't followed his bride down the balcony to chase after her. It is her father's house that has been contacted minutes after Soo's departure. Now that everyone already knows about her escape, by notifying her family about her safety and wellbeing, they will at least have one less thing to worry about. 'No Rustin can possibly be asleep right now, and the same is true about the Raads. The poor engineer! What could be worse for a lover than picturing another man making love to the woman he loves.'

'Please stop it!' Soo covers her face with her hands.

‘Don’t you want to free him from that heartbreaking thought he has had all night long?’

‘He knew this day was coming. If there is such a mental image, he has probably had it ever since I entered this miserable marriage four months ago. You think making me feel guiltier will help me?’ Soo picks up the phone, saying that she’ll call her parents, provided Tahmineh keeps quiet and not divulge her hiding place, but she will not call Joe or his grandmother. The last thing she needs is to involve them in this disaster. Only God knows the means he’d use to find her at a time when she wants to be left alone.

‘Well then, good luck keeping such news from a man like him! How will he ever find out that the most-talked-about wedding in the community ended in the Rustin bride’s disappearance from the *hejleh*?’

Soo gives her a dirty look for her sarcasm and finally makes the difficult call. Sara answers nervously on the very first ring, with a lump in her throat which melts into tears hearing Soo’s voice. The fifteen-year-old quickly summarises the chaos they have been dealing with for the past few hours. Khanom Jaan has been taken to the neighbourhood medical centre for heart palpitations, but she’ll be fine. Their mother is not feeling any better either, having been put to sleep by strong sedatives, and is being cared for by the female guests. All the remaining guests, along with Rasool and his father’s family, had first returned to their house after her disappearance and the break-in by the intruders.

‘What? What intruders? What break-in?’ Soo gets a sudden heat all over. She kicks and pushes the blankets off her and gives a shocked look to Tahmineh who doesn’t hesitate to place her ear next to the receiver. ‘No, of course not. I am certainly not kidnapped, neither am I in the hands of some outlaws or eloped with anyone ... No, I kept looking back as I was running away. I saw no one after me on the street before I got into a cab and fled. What are you talking about, Sara?’

Sara explains the incident, while Soo and Tahmineh listen, open-mouthed.

‘Did the men say who they were?’ asks Soo.

Sara tells her that the intruders had only declared being on a mission to take the bride with them. Except for what they did to Rasool, there has been no physical harm and no robbery. Rasool too, on the basis of what he was told when

they assaulted him, is certain that they were merely there to kidnap the bride and prevent the consummation of marriage, and then took off.

‘How is Dad taking all this?’ asks Soo.

From what Soo hears, Ebrahim’s reaction has been as expected. If Khanom Jaan hadn’t collapsed in front of his eyes and had it not been for the immediate medical attention she needed, Ebrahim himself would have most likely been hospitalised hearing such shattering news.

Soo hears her mother wake up. When told it is Soo on the phone, Shireen starts crying again and thanks God that there is some news from her missing daughter.

‘Tell Mum I am terribly sorry she is hurting, but I can’t talk to any of our elders now. I promise to keep in touch if only you or Salman answer the phone in the evenings, not anyone else. I have to go, Sara.’ Soo hangs up, before having to deal with her mother, whose sentimental mourning and pleading for her daughter’s return Soo knows she won’t have the heart to say no to.

‘My goodness, what on earth has happened? I got lost where the intruders entered the scene. Were they sent there by Joe?’ asks Tahmineh.

‘Dear Lord,’ says Soo quietly, looking out the window, staring at the skies that are beginning to show a lighter hue of navy blue. ‘He never ceases to amaze me by going that extra mile. He still did what he thought was right, what he knew I needed, even though I had told him not to, and had never asked for his help. Only God knows how many times I turned him down and pushed him away, but he never held a grudge against me or turned his back on me, despite his pride and arrogance.’ In a society like theirs, even if a woman tries to be her own heroine, nothing is as reassuring as having a powerful support in the background.

Tahmineh gives her a hug as Soo starts shedding tears again.

‘If I hadn’t dared to do what I did, or had I failed in my escape, he would have saved me regardless. It’s truly beyond words how he makes me feel, and what he still does to me.’

‘Guess you don’t have to worry about Joe finding out, since he is already at the centre of everything. Are you going to call him, or are you planning on letting him and that poor grandmother stay worried sick about you?’

‘I guess I have to, now. But I will only call his grandmother. Knowing him, he is out searching the whole city and won’t be home.’ Soo knows Joe must be in constant contact with Farah, thinking she might have gone there. Besides, she has witnessed him doing the most bizarre things with phones. Calling him could make the Sabri’s phone-line susceptible to being tracked down by him.

Tahmineh’s husband, Majid Sabri, comes downstairs into the yard in his work clothes. He is all ready to leave for work, and is doubly surprised not only to find his wife back home so early, but also to see the bride there with her. He has met Soo only once, and that was at his own wedding a few months ago. He waves a friendly and sheepish hello to the two women through the window. Tahmineh steps out momentarily and briefs him about the change of plans and returns to Soo. He then bows to them with much respect and humbleness before heading out.

‘Where did he go to, so early at daybreak?’ asks Soo.

‘To work. He starts around five, way before his bosses get there.’

‘I feel terrible. The poor guy left without breakfast as soon as he realised you had company?’ says Soo, sniffing.

‘No, he eats at work. The good thing about his job is that he is always well fed.’

‘He seems to be a very nice and decent man, but are you absolutely sure he won’t mind me staying here for a while?’

‘Would you relax, already? For the thousandth time, he won’t. You saw the way he reacted when he saw us. Just stop crying and concentrate on making your phone call.’

Tahmineh hands Soo the phone receiver, and Soo finally calls Farah, who as expected hasn’t slept a wink all night. Soo expresses her thankfulness for all the trouble her grandson has gone through because of her. However, in spite of Farah’s non-stop offer of assistance, Soo tells her that she needs no one and

nothing, but herself to hopefully build enough strength to deal with the guilt of sinfulness, disloyalty, and disillusionment, as well as fear.

Farah rings her grandson immediately and transfers Soo's message, bringing an ocean of relief to the devastated Joe.

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The Rustin's household in its twenty-four hour post-wedding state is nothing compared to the live, vibrant atmosphere it had only a day ago. Having finished a long prayer in his study, Ebrahim is sitting on his prayer rug, in a traumatised state, more like a fatigued soldier staring at the corpse of his comrade.

Out in the upstairs corridor, Shireen picks up the tray she left for him behind his door an hour ago, containing a couple of aspirins, a glass of tea, and a bowl of soup. She knocks at his door again. 'Agha, please open up. We need you downstairs.'

'I said unless there is an update on Soo, I want to be left alone.'

'They have sent back Soo's *jahiziyeh* in a few trucks. The men want to know where we want them stored.'

Ebrahim opens the study door with a frown and a puzzled look at the wall clock which shows one in the morning.

'The drivers say Agha Ali's family was concerned about our neighbours finding out, and so they thought this would be a better time for the delivery.'

Ebrahim rushes to the door, followed by his wife, who argues against taking all that valuable stuff to the basement, where she is certain it will be ruined. They see no other option but to store everything in the drawing room, the second most spacious area in their dwelling after the basement, roomy enough to accommodate it all. Thus, the workers fit the dowry in the drawing room, right next to the piles of abandoned wedding presents, which are yet to be dealt with.

Although the painkillers Ebrahim's wife forces him to take might take the edge off his pounding headache, hardly anything can cure the heartache of shame and despair they are now going through. Pacing the drawing room, Ebrahim recalls the numerous proposal gatherings held right there with suitors of all types

asking for Soo's hand in marriage. Little did he know then that less than two days into her marriage to the most eligible suitor, he'd be looking at his daughter's dowry in the very same room, stacked up to the ceiling, along with the mountain of her unopened wedding presents. He turns his back to the sorrowful mementos and opens the window. Maybe the poignant season's early morning breeze – the subject of romantic Persian poems for hundreds of years – will expel the suffocating air out of the room.

His Leily has been right again, he thinks. He should have acted upon the alarming dream he had about her and stopped the wedding. But how? How could he have undone months of planning and hundreds of wedding invitations? What would people have said behind their backs? And it wasn't just Leily. Joe too had warned him. But why? He had been too preoccupied after Joe's short visit to think deeply about what Joe might have had against Rasool to defame him the way he did. Whatever. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. Again, nothing could have been done at that point, just as the engineer himself confirmed by his analogous allusion to that famous verse, implying it was too late to be undone.

Something else seems to hit him. He takes a curious look at the presents. It doesn't take him long to spot Joe's among the rest. Come to think of it now, for a wedding present, his doesn't look ordinary in terms of size, nor does it weigh all that much. Could it possibly contain some kind of documents against Rasool to prove that he doesn't deserve Soo?

He can't help picking it up. The pink and blue stripes of the wrapping paper look identical to the mixed-colour yarn Soo used in knitting those beanie hats for the infants. In deep thought, he gently opens it up, trying not to make any tears. He is dazed to see a four-page title deed as well as a photo in which Joe is carrying some infants in the worst of circumstances, hanging from a rope from the side wall of a burning building surrounded by flames. He turns the picture over. There is a handwritten short note.

*This was left behind, so I thought I'd return it.*

Except for his racing heart, Ebrahim looks frozen, deducing how the pieces of this life-altering, momentous puzzle fall into place. He reaches for the window and puts his head out, gasping for air, panting, and sweating all over. Everything

is crystal clear to him now. 'His other wish he never told me about,' he whispers. 'Dear Lord! He has been after my Soo all along.'

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Without a word of this to his family, as of eight am sharp, he has been trying to ring Joe numerous times at his office number, but there has been no answer. He has also called the general number of his engineering firm and left a message for him. But, he is told that unfortunately the engineer doesn't keep a regular roster for his work hours.

He heads out to the real estate registration bureau where – as the address on the title deed shows – the legal transaction has taken place.

'Of course I confirm it, sir,' says the manager, at the edge of becoming offended. 'As I said, this *ghabaleh* is a genuine, binding and legal document with no flaws or fraudulence. And I wouldn't have it any other way. Ours is a family-owned reputable business, where for decades my forefathers and I have done our best to offer first-class, legitimate services to this community.'

Still Ebrahim isn't taking any chances. He stops by the head office of Tehran's Registration Bureau itself, where he is finally convinced by their reaffirmation that the document is indeed lawful. For the next two crucial things on his agenda he needs to make a trip to his old neighbourhood, something he is not exactly thrilled about doing and hasn't done for ten years ever since that incident with Joe. But he can't stay away from his house any longer than he already has. It is already one pm, and talking to Joe has utmost priority to him over anything else today. Thus, he heads back home.

Upon his return, Shireen tells him that he just missed a call from a person named Yousef Raad who said he'd ring back. Ebrahim refrains from speaking to anyone until he receives the long-awaited call from Joe.

'Mr Raad ... Yes, I told them I needed to speak with you urgently. I'm sure you know what this is about. There are a lot of things that need to be said and heard between us. I've taken the liberty of opening up your wedding present and seen both its contents. There is no doubt you have been involved in my daughter's escape.' He starts pacing the floor, carrying the phone with him as far as the

length of the cord allows him to, while listening to Joe. 'She has already brought it to our attention. We know she is not with you, and you don't know her hiding place ... That doesn't make a difference. Whether or not you were aware of her plan to leave her husband, I'm sure those intruders were sent there by you. There are serious issues between us that can't be discussed over the phone. I want to see you and your family in my house as soon as possible. How soon can you make it? ... Yes, this evening at six it is.' He hangs up and paces the floor some more in a deep pensive mood.

Prior to meeting the Raads, he decides to divulge Yousef Raad's identity to Shireen and their two younger children. Except for Soo, Shireen is the only one in the family who has once seen Joe ten years ago, and that was when he carried Soo home on his back, causing the unforgettable epoch-making incident in their lives. So, to prevent a probable shock which might elicit an improper reaction in his wife – even fainting – he deems it necessary to prepare her in advance before she comes face to face with Joe again. But regardless of his family's much-expected request to find out more about what has been happening between the two men, that is all he tells them, stalling the rest to an indefinite later time.

As for Khanom Jaan, she is staying at her daughter's home at the moment, which is a blessing in disguise. She would have been the most difficult to deal with in regard to Joe's involvement in their lives. Luckily, Ebrahim's sister has insisted on taking her home with her, thinking it would be best for their mother to be away from Ebrahim's house where the wedding has taken place, and where she would be constantly reminded of her beloved grandchildren: the bride and groom.

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The Raads' historic visit to the Rustins is by far the most unforeseen event any of them would have expected to see happening one day. There are mixed feelings among the members of the two families. Though Joe and Ebrahim appear to be sombre and confident about the upcoming talks, what's evident about the rest is their nervousness, lack of enthusiasm, uncertainty, and ambivalence. However, as Shireen and her children lay eyes on the extraordinary Joe, they become transfixed at the sight of someone with his physical appearance. Unlike his ordinary jeans or leather biker outfit, he is in a dark blue suit, which his family

has made him wear. And except for a few exchanges of grave looks with Ebrahim, his eyes are on the ground, being considerate of the religious household and the unrelated females around.

Joe has brought with himself his grandmother and his two sisters, Foroozan and Foroogh, both in their thirties. While Farah has on her black veil, Joe's brunette sisters are neatly dressed up without covers, yet in modest semi-casual clothing. Ebrahim immediately recognises Farah as Joe's messenger.

In a quiet and concise way, Joe introduces his family. 'My father couldn't make it. He is in no condition to move around much.'

The situation is by all means awkward, uncomfortable, and full of tension, yet the men greet one another warmly. Salman too shakes hands with the astonishing Joe, all the while staring at him from head to toe open-mouthed, and would have continued on if his father had not shown the guests to the drawing room.

Once they are seated, and the younger Rustins help their mother bring in the tea and the rest of the refreshments – what Soo used to do for years – Salman and Sara leave the room, though in this specific case they wish they didn't have to.

'Please forgive us for coming here empty-handed, and I need to be frank about something,' says Farah, in a soft voice. 'We honestly didn't know what to call this gathering. The girls and I thought we should bring some flowers and pastry, but then as a last-minute decision, we ... were told,' she says, giving a quick, nervous look at Joe, 'to leave them in the trunk of the car. We ... were hesitant and unsure of how you would react if we ...'

She leaves her sentence hanging in the middle of the utmost tense atmosphere; nonetheless, they all know what is implied. This can't possibly be considered a proposal gathering when the hosts might thirst for Joe's blood for what they think he has done to Soo and her marriage.

'What Grandma is trying to say,' Foroozan completes Farah's sentence, 'is that we didn't want to make you uncomfortable by foisting any presumptuous ideas on you about this visit, and so our brother thought it best if we just came in empty-handed.'

All Shireen knows is that for some undisclosed reason her husband has invited the most unlikely person on earth and his family into their home. Yet as the hostess, she has certain obligations and duties to the guests, all of which she will carry out regardless. 'You don't need to explain or apologise. Please make yourselves at home.' As Shireen goes on with the usual *ta'arofing*, asking them to help themselves with the refreshments, the sound of the doorbell interrupts everyone even before they start the talks. She takes a quick peek through the window, and watches Salman open the yard door to Khanom Jaan. 'It's your mother, *agha*,' she says to her husband with a nervous smile and face that has immediately turned pale. 'She will soon be coming in here to join us.'

'Tell the kids to keep her occupied in the living room.'

Shireen leaves but only for less than a minute. The old lady's voice is soon heard talking to Shireen behind the door, along with her gentle knock.

Ebrahim rushes to the door, blocking her mother's way, and after welcoming her back, he politely raises his concern that considering her health, maybe it'd be best if she weren't present in this gathering.

'Something is wrong, isn't it? Or else you wouldn't be keeping any secrets from your own mother.'

'No, Mother —'

'My God. It's Soo. Something has happened to my Soo, you don't want me to know.'

'No, I swear it isn't that. Last we heard she was fine and safe. It's just —'

She interrupts him by stating that whatever it is, she can handle, and that she'll have a *real* heart attack this time, if she waited in another room, worrying. 'Besides, what could be more catastrophic than what we've already ...' She cuts herself short, suddenly becoming conscious about divulging her family's secret to some strangers.

'Alright, suit yourself.' He moves out of her way, and she enters followed by Shireen.

The guests all get up to greet the matriarch of the household, and the hosts prepare a comfortable seat on the floor for her, next to the other elderly lady,

Farah. Even before a brief introduction is made, Khanom Jaan recognises Joe as the spectacular biker who didn't join them at the wedding, and Farah as the anonymous wedding guest who only had a brief chat with the bride and disappeared before being introduced to anyone else.

After wiping the tears from her eyes, recalling the doomed wedding, Khanom Jaan continues, 'I'm in fact thrilled that I finally got a chance to meet both of you.' She faces Ebrahim. 'Why would you not want me to meet these wonderful people?' She looks uneasy noticing Soo's returned dowry piled up at the other side of the drawing room. 'I apologise for the way our drawing room looks. I've been in my daughter's home for the past couple of days, and you know how disorderly the house gets in the absence of an elder.'

'Please relax, Mother. Everyone here is aware of the break-up. This whole gathering is in fact directly related to that.'

'I see. So they all know?' she asks with a surprised look before bursting into tears as her emotions get the best of her. 'It was the best of weddings, the most stunning of all brides, the most elegant dowry prepared over the years, and now look at us ... May whoever has been responsible —'

'That's enough, Mother,' Ebrahim interrupts her.

Shireen's eyes are just as teary, remembering the adversity. The guests look deeply affected and mortified.

'With all due respect, this is one of the reasons why I didn't want you here,' says Ebrahim, handing his mother the box of tissues with a glare and telling her she needs to get a hold of herself, or he can't put her health at risk by having her there for the rest of this gathering.

She apologises and promises to settle herself down, while looking more curious than before about this mysterious visit.

Ebrahim explains that there is both good and bad news in what is about to be discussed but reassures his mother that everyone is fine. Still, too worried about her family's wellbeing to wait till the end, she asks him to start with the bad news first.

‘Very well, as you wish. I’ve known Mr Yousef Raad for a few months now through a few encounters that we’ve had, and he has brought it to my attention that he is the same teenager we’ve had problems with, back in our old neighbourhood.’

Khanom Jaan appears dumbfounded. She looks at Joe and then faces Ebrahim. ‘What exactly are you saying, son? He can’t possibly be ... *Joe*?’ She chokes on her saliva and starts a nervous cough.

Shireen offers her some water which she refuses to take.

Ebrahim prefers to continue without a direct reply, ‘Yet, he is much more than that.’ Within the next few minutes, it is revealed to everyone that their male guest is the same generous engineer who has done all those admirable deeds for the orphanage, heating and all, as well as the same masked knight who saved their lives on the night of the curfew. He then hands his mother and wife Joe’s wedding present: the title deed and the photo, and further explains to them that he is also the person rescuing the orphans from the fire and sending his grandmother, Ms Farah, to their door as his messenger.

As much as the Rustin ladies try to avoid staring at the *namahram*, their hanging jaws and raised brows show the high level of their astonishment.

Ebrahim faces his mother. ‘Now, with your permission and trusting that you have been briefed about Mr Raad’s prior encounters with us, I need to move on to the main reason for this gathering, which is the unfortunate incident we now have on our hands.’

During the next two hours, a flood of enquiries and questions are headed Joe’s way but only by Ebrahim. His mother and wife are still too preoccupied absorbing and processing the new shocking information to be able to speak, let alone comment. Joe’s sisters are just as quiet. And except for Farah, who gives a brief run-down of her role as Joe’s messenger twice in this journey, Joe is the one doing all the answering and elaborations in Soo’s defence, as well as his own. He also brings out of his pocket the ring box containing the ring he had meant to give to Soo in the van, only to have found out right there and then that she had already married her cousin.

With much respect and sympathy, Joe does his best to placate the hosts and alleviate their pain. He denies any assumed plans to elope, or even any connection between what Soo and he have done to disrupt the wedding. 'Neither one of us knew what the other one was up to. I didn't know she was going to escape from the bedroom, and she didn't know I was going to send my men to get her out of there. We were both shocked to find out later on what the other has done.' Joe states that he understands their devastation and how much they are hurting. But whatever they think of him and his genuine incentive in wooing her, it wouldn't be fair to blame Soo or think any less of her. She never wanted to be where they are now, and he swears that he has never seen or heard of anyone so conscious about her relationship with God. They know her too well to suspect that there has been any sinning between the two of them. But he can say this about her: she never wanted to marry someone she didn't love, nor marry someone who didn't respect her unconventional wishes. He asserts that had this marriage not been disrupted, she would have been unhappy for the rest of her life, which is not what they would have wanted for a daughter like her.

There is yet a second arrival to startle them again, but fortunately not until the end of their session when all is said and heard. It is the defeated Rasool, and his sudden visit gives everyone, and particularly the hosts, a shock.

Ebrahim is the first to excuse himself and head out after hiding Joe's presents under the coffee table, and asking Joe to put the ring back in his pocket. His wife and mother follow him.

In the hallway outside the drawing room, the agitated Rasool is looking for the household elders, while Salman and Sara are informing him of the guests and trying to keep him calm.

'They're having guests in the middle of such a crisis?' yells Rasool, heading towards the drawing room.

'What's going on here?' asks Ebrahim.

'I've come to clear any misunderstandings and misinterpretations that might have arisen by the return of Soo's dowry last night. It was my parents' decision. I only agreed to it to prove to you that I don't care about some materialistic things.'

‘No one would doubt that, Rasool,’ says Khanom Jaan. ‘You are not a stranger to us.’

‘Surely everyone knows that a successful businessman would not be in need of his wife’s *jahiziyeh* to furnish his house,’ affirms Ebrahim. ‘Dowry is a tradition.’

‘Whatever. The point is that my wife herself is what’s important to me and what I’m still not giving up on.’

The already-startled Rustins are further taken aback and exchange a look of disbelief.

Back in the drawing room, Joe is about to lose control and lash out at Rasool, hearing him rant. Had they not been there as guests, and if it hadn’t been for his family pleading him to keep seated, he would have definitely given Rasool a piece of his mind.

Rasool continues in the hallway, ‘I don’t care how adamant my parents are in pushing me towards the divorce procedures, I’m not letting go of my wife. And I want you to back me up before this disgrace becomes the talk of the town and costs us much more than it already has.’

‘But, weren’t you just as determined as your parents to go ahead with the divorce when you all rushed back here on the wedding night?’ asks Khanom Jaan.

‘That was then; this is now. I was shocked, humiliated, and angry. People say all sorts of rubbish when they’re not thinking straight.’

‘And you *are now*? Do you even know what you’re asking us, boy?’ says Khanom Jaan. ‘We can’t pressure Soo to take you back, even if we had access to her. Up to this very moment, none of us knows where she is.’

‘How can you expect me to make a runaway daughter, who is not even in my home, return to a husband she fled from in the first place?’ says Ebrahim. ‘That’s neither fair nor possible.’

‘*Seriously*, Uncle Ebrahim? So is that how it’s going to be? You’re going to sit here, do nothing about this disaster, and call it fair?’

‘Please bring your voice down. No one is as concerned about everything as I am but —’

‘Then why am I the only one doing everything single-handedly, going back and forth to all the police stations and calling everyone I know to find her, whereas it should be you as her family —’

‘This is not the best of times.’ Ebrahim tries to turn his nephew’s shoulders to the opposite direction. ‘Why don’t you wait in the living room or come back another time when —’

‘I can’t believe this.’ Rasool shakes himself free of his uncle’s hold. ‘What could be more important? You’d rather be chatting with some guests than —’

‘I asked you to bring your voi—’

‘Who are they anyway?’ he asks giving a suspicious and curious look towards the drawing room. ‘Your kids refused to tell me. They can’t be our relatives or you wouldn’t be this nervous about —’

‘Didn’t you hear what your uncle said?’ Khanom Jaan tells him off, yet Rasool storms into the drawing room, followed by the rest of the Rustins, including Soo’s siblings.

The situation is now at the peak of its awkwardness, with everyone uncertain about the expected demeanour and appropriate reaction to show to the others. Except for Joe, who continues to keep his gaze on the floor, the rest of the Raads pretend a smile and say *salaam*. Farah bends her head low and covers most of her face with her veil, worried that if Rasool recognises her, it will cause more problems in the already-turbulent situation, which in turn might aggravate her short-tempered, wild grandson.

‘This is my nephew, Rasool.’

‘The *son-in-law*.’ Rasool corrects his uncle, while his suspicious eyes are locked on the male guest. ‘I am this family’s son-in-law.’

As Joe gives him another scornful look, Rasool recognises him even before Ebrahim continues with the introduction.

‘And this is Mr Yousef Raad and his grandmother and sisters.’

‘Say no more. The world-famous Mr Engineer, the miracle-worker of the orphanage needs no introduction,’ says Rasool with a sarcastic tone. ‘Are you here with a project to rebuild that ill-fated burnt place and hire my wife as a full-time carer?’

Farah, who has been trying to hold Joe back, presses even harder on her grandson’s lap.

‘But wait a second, for that you didn’t need to bring along your female family members.’ Rasool turns an angry look on his uncle. ‘Unless this is a ... *khastegari*.’

‘No, this isn’t a —’

‘And he couldn’t possibly be here for Sara who is already engaged. I should have known from the first time I saw him there with all his fake heroic —’

‘You’re making wrong speculations, Rasool,’ interrupts Khanom Jaan. ‘If you just go back to the living room until we —’

‘Until you what? Proceed with a proposal gathering for Soo when she already has a husband ... *me*,’ he yells, pointing at himself.

‘I don’t want anyone raising their voices in this house,’ says Ebrahim. ‘I myself have invited these guests over.’

‘He is right, Agha Rasool. Do you see any fresh pastry or flowers around?’ confirms Shireen.

Joe murmurs a ‘let’s go’ with a head gestures to his family, and then faces Ebrahim. ‘It’s best we left now. Thanks for having us.’

As the Raads get up, and the women exchange their rushed goodbyes and nervous thanks, Rasool gets a sudden change of complexion on his face. Noticing Farah’s height and facial features, and hearing her voice, he recognises the blue-eyed woman, the much talked-about messenger, whose prior encounter with him cost him his reliability and suitability among his in-laws.

He points at her with a glare, while drops of sweat sit on his forehead. ‘You’re the same woman, the ominous messenger who ... If you’re his grandmother ... then he must be the man in the pho ...’ He cuts himself short as

the mystery unravels for him. He goes to the door blocking the Raads' way, while facing the Rustins. 'Am I right?'

Everyone keeps quiet. Salman and Sara, who have just recently joined the rest, look stricken, hearing this information for the first time.

Silence has never before implied such bitter affirmation to Rasool. 'You must already know everything about him, and still act like ...? This is the man Soo has been seeing behind my back, the man who has ruined my marriage by having unlawful secret encounters with my wife.'

'*Khejalat bekesh*, shame on you, talking about Soo that way! Bite your tongue,' snaps Khanom Jaan.

'Dad, I can't take his demeaning behaviour and insults anymore,' mutters a very zealous Salman whose brotherly ardour is about to make him lose control, but Ebrahim tugs at his sleeve and tells him not to interfere.

Joe is gritting his teeth and cupping his fist with a frightful look toward Rasool, but his sisters and Farah hold his arms tightly.

'I'm going to have to ask you to either leave this room or step away from the guests,' says Ebrahim.

Rasool continues, 'What the hell are you all up to behind my back? Two days into our marriage and you're holding secret gatherings, planning to hand my wife over to a man like him? How dare you? How could you even let such a despicable jerk into your home, let alone —'

'You're way out of line, Rasool, not to mention delusional and disrespectful to us and to the guests,' says Khanom Jaan. 'This is your uncle's home, and *he* decides who steps into this house and for what reason.'

'You should also know that it was this young man who saved you on the night of the curfew or you'd be dead now,' adds Ebrahim.

The jaw-dropping new information turns Salman's and Sara's faces toward Joe, showering him with admiring glances.

Rasool, however, seems to have become more indignant. 'I see,' he says, inspecting Joe's figure as the first masked man he came across, and associating

him with the other two masked men. 'You son of a bitch! You're the one who sent those armed and masked bastards to ruin my wedding night.' Rasool makes a sudden attack toward Joe who dodges the strike with his forearm, and sends him to the ground without much effort. He then lets his family and himself out of the drawing room.

The situation is now out of control. 'You knew *that* too? You *knew* he is the devil behind this whole disaster? How can you just stand there and set him free. He has Soo. He knows where she is.' Regardless of all the reprimands, Rasool is unstoppable. He squirms out of his relatives' firm hold and goes after Joe.

'Please step back, Agha Rasool,' Farah warns him as she and her grandchildren bend down to put their shoes back on at the entrance to the yard. 'You don't know what he is capable of. He is just being considerate of the circumstances, or you wouldn't be standing right now.'

'Oh, believe me there is no doubt about his capabilities, alright. I am now starting to see exactly what this is all about. He has done the unmentionable, hasn't he?' yells Rasool. 'My God, you're trying to cover up this disgraceful disaster by making him marry Soo because he has taken away her virginity.'

Of all the derogatory and disrespectful comments a religious family can be insulted with, he has just thrown in the most degrading one, jolting them and the Raads in the worst possible way. The guests stop at the house door. Joe turns his red face to him with his darkest look ever, while his sisters and grandmother bite their lower lips and cover their faces.

'Please don't interfere. He is just angry. He doesn't mean it,' Farah tries to mollify Joe's fury.

'We shouldn't be here. Let's just leave, Bro,' says Foroozan, patting Joe on the shoulder.

Khanom Jaan is beating and scratching herself on the face, worried that the neighbours have heard Rasool. Shireen is leaning on her already-trembling Sara for support, with a face that resembles the plaster on the wall. Salman threshes around towards his cousin, saying he has no right destroying his chaste sister's *aberu* and their *namous*. But the momentary fistfight ends in Salman being

pushed back where his father and Sara catch him and hold him away from Rasool. Ebrahim is clenching his teeth and his fists.

Rasool continues, 'It's obvious. Why else would a bride in her position run away from the *hejleh*, and why would you be having a secret meeting with the least expected person, only two days after her wedding, if such a shameful catastrophe hadn't happened?'

'Get out of my house!' Ebrahim finally mutters what he never thought he'd say.

'Fine. Throw your own nephew out instead of this trash, but think twice. If you're planning on making him your son-in-law you should know that he is spending many, many long years behind bars for what he has done to me, and I promise you that I'll destroy his marriage to Soo the way he destroyed mine.'

'*Khodaya!* What catastrophe is this, Lord? My son Haji Ali will just die. I wish I were dead.' Khanom Jaan ends up on her knees in the yard while still beating herself.

Rasool continues, 'And as for Soo, I'll give you a week, only one week to find her and bring her back to me. Regardless of whatever sinning has gone on between the two of them, I am willing to take her back and cover up this mess before this shame becomes the talk of town, but only if a doctor certifies that she is still a virgin.'

That does it. Rasool has hit the most sensitive nerve in Joe. Through his piercing eyes which are turning purple in colour, and with swollen veins of similar purplish tint throbbing on his neck, he watches Rasool storm towards the outside door, passing by the guests who seem frozen in their place. But as he opens the door, Joe blocks his way and slams the yard door closed. 'Not so fast. You're not going anywhere until I'm through with you.'

'Get your hands away from the door *haroomzadeye kaseef*, you dirty bastard,' shouts Rasool.

'You're first taking back what you said about that heavenly girl and apologising to everyone, or else.'

‘I’ll do that when you bring her back to us, or when you tell us where you’re keeping her.’ Rasool applies all the power in his two arms to the door knob, but the door on which Joe’s left hand is pressed doesn’t move at all, and only raises his frustration.

‘I don’t have her, and at the moment I don’t know where she is. Not that I can’t find out. But even then, I wouldn’t reveal that information to anyone, because I respect her wish to remain hidden until she is ready to return on her own, and I will never betray anyone’s trust. Then again if the words *wish*, *trust*, and *respect* had ever meant anything to you —’

Rasool bursts into a violent scuffle with Joe. Yet not many of his kicks or punches hit the target, and those that do land on Joe, don’t seem to hurt him. His swearwords are just as ineffective. Except for making his family embarrassed, his derogatory language doesn’t seem to infuriate Joe any more than he has already been, hearing all the bluster from him all along. Joe merely dodges his futile attacks, and artfully moves the brawl towards the basement stairs where he grabs Rasool by the throat.

‘Stop it, both of you!’ Ebrahim approaches them.

‘Please stay out of this, Mr Rustin. In addition to what I told him to do, I have unfinished business with him, and I’d hate to take it outside, making a scene in front of the neighbours.’

‘I don’t want any violence or anyone getting hurt in my home,’ says Ebrahim.

‘I assure you that I don’t waste any punches or kicks on sore losers. This’ll hopefully be just a talk in a civil manner,’ says Joe, dragging Rasool along with him, down to the basement.

Everyone follows, some begging, some crying, and all looking anguished.

‘*Toro Khoda*, for God’s sake, let him go, Joe. He is not worth it,’ cries Foroogh, cautiously following the crowd down the stairs in her high heels.

Rasool looks shocked. ‘*Joe?*’

‘You’ve heard right,’ says Joe, propelling him into a corner in the basement. ‘I am all that you thought I was. Plus I am *the Joe*. It’s time you realised who

you're up against. If you still think you can take me on, be my guest. And yes, I was the one sending a couple of my mates to make sure that angel did not hand herself to someone like you.'

'I'll kill you,' says Rasool, attacking Joe again.

Joe pushes him back. 'Yet she didn't need my assistance. She was brilliant enough to realise she deserved better and capable enough to get herself out without anyone's help. How on earth did you possibly think you deserved an extraordinary and remarkable girl like her?'

'Shut the hell up!' yells Rasool.

'And just to set things straight, if there is only one thing I am not capable of, it's the unmentionable you just mentioned. How very Rustin of you accusing your own cousin, her of all people, of such a sin!'

Rasool faces Ebrahim. 'This giant lunatic is Joe, your biggest enemy? How? What is he doing back in your lives, let alone in your home? If this is some kind of a sick joke, it isn't funny,' says Rasool, struggling to get out of the corner.

Ebrahim doesn't reply, nor do the rest of the witnesses.

Joe continues shoving Rasool back to his designated place. 'The sickest joke is the way you secretly made fun of that innocent girl's aspirations and dreams, and played games with her.'

Even with visible signs of fatigue, Rasool seems relentless in his attempts to defeat Joe, yet to the witnesses the brawl looks like a frustrated mouse being played with by a frisky cat. Soo's siblings look especially content with the easy way their phenomenal guest has brought their obnoxious cousin to his knees.

'What is the matter with this family? Have you all made a deal with Satan and been put under a spell? You're going to take this felon's side instead of a blood-relative's. How can you just stand there and watch a family member be treated like this in the hands of a dirty stranger whose reputation is not a secret to anyone?'

'My connection to this family is far too poignant and complicated to be understood by someone like you. They have seen your true colours when you did what you did to that poor girl. *Your henna has no colour anymore.* And with the

show you put on today, *you'll see behind your ears* before you can arouse any sympathy or advocacy from them.'

Rasool faces Ebrahim. 'Tell this jerk to stay out of my —'

'Not until you do what I asked you to.' Joe states that as a guest he took all of his ranting and insults, and did nothing. He tried to control himself in the presence of the seniors and elders while Rasool rambled on and on with his abuse. But his last comment was the last straw. 'I can't and will not ignore or allow such an offensive remark on that virtuous girl's chastity. This is your chance to come clean and wipe away the unjust blemish and stigma you've brought onto a perfect girl's immaculate character.'

'I don't know what you're all up to, but you, Mr Joe Raad, cannot keep me here forever. You're only adding extra years of imprisonment to yourself. Just wait till I report all that you've done to the police.'

Rasool's uncooperativeness touches another raw nerve in Joe. This time Joe gets a hold of his collar, lifts him above the ground as if he is a house pet, and hits his back against the wall, making him yelp. 'Listen carefully, and don't you dare threaten me! I never spend more than a short time in jail, simply because my services are much needed in the community. Besides, if you knew what Soo meant to these people present here, you wouldn't count on any one of them testifying against me as a witness to what I'm about to do to you if you don't comply.'

'Put me down, you —'

'Too bad you come from an honourable family, and what a shame we are in the presence of our elders.' Joe then confirms that when Soo found the photo she came to him, but only to beg for those kids' whereabouts and to condemn him for not notifying her about their rescue. She was miserable, tormented, and all the while fasting too, guilt-ridden and terrified about losing God's proximity by coming to a stranger. 'But still, as much as I wanted to, I did not give her the information she was after. Do you know why?' he asks, still holding Rasool up on the wall with one hand and dodging him with the other.

'I don't care.'

‘Because I respected the decision she had made, which was to have a future with you.’ From the way Rasool had kept his message from her, it was obvious that he wanted nothing to do with those children. If she were to start having contacts with the orphans again, he knew she’d be ruining her marital life, and he wanted her to be happy, no matter who she’d be with, which is something Rasool would never understand. Whereas he watched her go through the most agonising time of her life, and kept the truth from her.

Rasool claims that he adores his wife and doesn’t need to explain to a stranger why he did what he did. She and her family have heard his side of the story.

‘No doubt, their ears are full of the nonsense you’ve tried to sell them. Your kind of love and adoration she can do without.’

‘And *you* know what love is? An ungodly, lecherous hell-raiser, who uses his looks and toned figure to trap any striking woman, even if she is a religious woman who is another man’s wife?’

‘Not that I didn’t want to have a goddess like her, but you didn’t lose her to me. She had far more important reasons that set her off. And don’t bring your fake faith into this. Instead of wearing all the outside colours of religiousness to pretend you are willing to do the righteous deeds, some people prefer to just do the deeds. I swear to God, had you not been related to this honourable family, I’d take revenge for what you did to that girl.’ He puts Rasool down reluctantly and takes a step back, asking him for the last time to take back what he said and confess to everyone the real reason for their break-up.

‘Don’t you put words in my mouth! You know damn well you’re the main core of this adversity,’ says Rasool, restarting another tussle.

Joe grabs him and turns to the audience. ‘Sorry everyone. Desperate times call for desperate measures,’ he says with a wink that he intentionally keeps hidden from Rasool, before taking him to another spot farther back in the basement.

Rasool yowls. ‘No, don’t you leave me alone with this psychopath. Get him away from me.’

They reach another wall where there is a sturdy iron hook with a sharp point, around which some thick clothesline ropes are wrapped. The audience follow. While Rasool shouts his new swearwords, Joe hangs him there from the collar of his trench coat. After a quick, pretend search of his pockets, Joe faces Farah. 'See what happens when you force me to wear a suit, grandma? I don't have any of my handy tools on me, the one time I need them the most.'

The two teenagers try to hide their laughter by pressing their lips between their front teeth.

With a frightening glare at Rasool, Joe reaches for the rope.

'Fine. I'd promised to make her fall in love with me before we ... but it ... didn't happen.'

'Not bad for starters, but that's not all,' says Joe, twisting the rope around his own hands. 'What about your breach of the prenuptials?'

'She ... must have found out I wanted us to have our own biological children, and not just one, and that I wasn't interested in adopting and raising other people's orphans, which were her ridiculous conditions.'

'I wonder how she could have possibly found that out,' says Joe with bitter sarcasm and insinuation. He then compels Rasool to tell everyone about their relationship, saying that the female photographers had been told to stay until later. 'Now why would a bride do that?' asks Joe, bringing the rope near Rasool's face.

'Soo said she wasn't comfortable uncovering herself and delayed the photoshoot to when the guests had left.'

But Joe points out that she was already uncovered in front of the female guests, and that it couldn't have been anyone else but Rasool she had problems with. 'I bet she has never taken *any* photos with you without her covers. In fact, during the past four months, she *never* let you see her without her veil or had *any* physical contact with you. Isn't that right?'

'You bastard, my intimate life with my wife is none of —'

'Unless you can tolerate this adventurous session of ours *until grass grows under your feet*, you'll give me an honest answer.'

‘No, she didn’t. As hard as I tried, she declined, and put everything off to our wedding night, which was ruined by you. Are you happy now, you filthy dog?’ shouts Rasool.

This is yet another shocking piece of information indicative of the couple’s unhealthy relationship, all of which their elders were unaware. Everyone looks astounded.

‘How presumptuous of you to have seen all these red flags and still thought you could have her as your wife and take her to your ...’ Joe cuts himself short considering the people around them. ‘So, was her escape from the *hejleh* because of the disgraceful remark you made a few minutes ago about her and me? Or was it because she didn’t love you to submit to you, and was certain you had lied in your promises to her?’

‘Alright, you win, damn it. I have no doubt in her virginity, and I know she is too God-fearing to sin. I’m sorry about what I said. But I thought after our wedding, I will get everyone’s support to change her mind about her future plans. I mean, come on! What husband would agree to such irrational prenuptial terms?’

‘Definitely not *you*,’ says Joe with a disgusted look. ‘Thank God, there is at least one condition in those prenuptials you can’t get out of, and that is her right to divorce you, which she will. You knew this marriage didn’t stand a chance, and yet you couldn’t resist having her even if it was for a short time. I’m too embarrassed in front of these people to make you say it out loud the one single thing you’ve been after all these years,’ says Joe, putting the rope back.

With one quick pull, he takes the hook off the wall and drops his victim, who tries to keep his balance but ends up on the ground, panting, out of breath, and above all humiliated. Joe jabs the hook back into the cement wall with the palm of his hand, driving the metal much farther inside than it initially was.

He turns around, pointing a threatening finger at Rasool. ‘If you come near her, stalk, intimidate, harass, or threaten her or this respectable family; if you spread false rumours about her to destroy her *aberi*, and this family’s *namous*, if you stall the divorce procedures or cause any problems in her future life, you’ll be dealing with me directly. And believe me no one in their right mind would want to mess with Joe Raad. You’re free to leave.’

The mortified Rasool heaves himself off the ground and out of the basement without a word or even a look to anyone, slamming the yard door as hard as he can behind him.

Joe faces the Rustins as he guides his family out of the basement. 'Sorry you had to witness that. If you need me, you know where to find me.'

Everyone is speechless, absorbing all the new revelations Joe has made. Salman is the only one that follows the guests upstairs into the yard. 'Mr Raad!'

Joe and the guests turn around.

'We owe you and your family a huge apology, sir, for my cousin's behaviour which shocked us all, and even a bigger thankyou,' says Salman with all the admiration and praise a voice can convey. 'No one could have stood up to him the way you did. And I appreciate your considerateness in dealing with this matter in the basement. We couldn't have taken him down there on our own, even if my father would allow any force and aggression in this house. And knowing how conscious we are about keeping face in front of our neighbours, my cousin would have taken advantage of this and used it against us to get what he wanted, if it hadn't been for you.'

'You're welcome. And you owe me nothing. It wasn't your fault,' says Joe, straightening his suit, and wiping the dusty shoe marks off his trousers.

'Also, I never thought I'd say this, but it was a true pleasure meeting you after all these years. Never in a million years would I have imagined *the Joe* to be anything like you, neither inside nor outside. I want to let you know that although my family still has got a lot to sort out and contemplate, I'd personally be honoured to have you as a family member. I can't think of a better match to my extraordinary sister.'

'That's very kind of you, and there is nothing more I want, but it's all up to your sister ... and also your elders. As for her, right now the last thing she wants is pressure or interference from any of us.'

'So, I've heard.'

'It was nice meeting you too. I'm glad that unlike your cousin you've got the Rustin blood in your veins.'

‘Thank you, sir. I’m nothing compared to you. If there is one person highly worthy of appreciation, it’s you who has been the true hero, and not just today. In fact, ever since you came here that night to get my father’s medicine, I have been wanting to know something about you, but for confidentiality and safety reasons, I refrain from asking you something which I know you won’t be able to answer.’

The two share a serious look.

Joe throws the car keys to Foroozan, asking his family to wait for him in the car. As Farah and the girls head out, he faces Salman again. ‘You are a wise young man. But don’t worry. You can ask me anything, as long as it is not about the JANG ... because you’re right; everything about that team is strictly confidential,’ explains Joe with an affectionate look.

Salman looks frozen by the unexpected and equivocal reply which brings sudden palpitations to his heart. He leans against the yard door and keeps reflecting even long after Joe’s departure, all the while unmindful of getting drenched from head to toe by the April showers.

With everyone still dazed and everything as crystal clear as daylight, the Rustins have not much else to debate, except to watch the gloomy, dark sky pour its cleansing rain, washing away with it the remaining traces of Rasool from their home, as well as from their hearts.

As for the Raads, shortly after Joe drops his family off, he is contacted via the radio while racing on his motorbike on the highway.

‘I’m more in the killing mood today, so this’d better not be an urgent rescue mission,’ he says, adjusting the earphone in his ear. ‘Are you sure? Where?’ He brings his bike to a sudden stop at the side of the road, creating a flood of angry horns blown behind him. ‘Just as I thought. That would be her friend’s new home. Is everything okay with her, as far as you know?’ He dismounts his bike. ‘Alright, just follow my prior instructions, and keep me posted regularly at the end of each shift. If anything looks suspicious, I want to be notified immediately.’ He hangs up and takes a deep sigh of relief before continuing on his way.

### Chapter 13: Missing Angels

The following morning, Ebrahim is more eager than ever, leaving the house as early as 7:30 am. Not only does he have to take care of the two unfinished things on his agenda he couldn't accomplish the previous day, but also there is now a more recent third matter, which is even more indispensable, requiring his utmost urgent attention over the other two.

Two hours later, standing behind a counter in a long queue, Ebrahim's deep thoughts are interrupted when the receptionist returns from another office at the end of a corridor and hands him back his documents. 'All is good to go, sir. Just make sure you bring in the medical certificate as soon as possible. Once we receive the confirmation from our head office, which I doubt will take more than two to three weeks, we will contact you to come in with your family and sign some papers. And that would be it. Anything else, sir?'

'Thank you, but the medical certificate ... I mean ... that would be the most difficult thing to ...' stutters Ebrahim, looking uncomfortable.

'I totally understand, sir. But unfortunately that is the only thing which can expedite this matter. As I understood, you were not after taking the ordinary route which would be a much longer process.'

On his way out of the building, Ebrahim bumps into an old colleague of his, Iraj Khorshidi, whom he hasn't seen for ten years since Ebrahim moved homes and schools after that incident with Joe. As it turns out, Khorshidi now holds a key administrative role in the same organisation following his early retirement from teaching five years ago. After much affectionate exchange of greetings, he invites Ebrahim inside his office on the same floor. Ebrahim appreciates his persuasive *ta'arofing*. However, being considerate of the man's time and apparent busy schedule he declines. Yet when he insists the reluctant Ebrahim sees it as disrespectful to keep turning him down. Hence, the two spend the next half hour catching up, chatting about their lives, and eventually what has brought Ebrahim there. Khorshidi asks his secretary for Ebrahim's file which is just being prepared to be sent off to the head office.

‘Nonsense is what I call this degrading requirement! Forget about the medical blah-blah. I’m glad I saw you before you left this building.’ Khorshidi emphasises that if there is one person and one family whose honour, dignity, and righteousness can be a role model to others and could be trusted even more than one’s own family members, it is Ebrahim Rustin and his household. And those who know the Rustins the way he does would never doubt such a thing.

Ebrahim is humbled by all the compliments and expresses his appreciation for Khorshidi’s kindness and helpfulness.

‘I will make a few calls,’ continues Khorshidi as he quickly stamps and signs the bottom of some forms. ‘This matter is done as soon as you and your family can come and sign the papers.’

Ebrahim gets up to leave just as rejoiced as grateful. However, a question from Khorshidi makes him stay for a further half hour. ‘If you are not in a rush and don’t mind me asking this, our old colleagues and I at that high school never understood why you suddenly sold your ancient family home and transferred your job to another school in a different suburb.’

Ebrahim reflects and sees no harm in opening up to him. In fact, he takes this opportunity as a blessing in disguise to help him get some background information on Joe, something which he has on his agenda for today anyway.

‘Oh, I see. And say no more. Of course I know him. Hard to believe but my story is not much different to yours. Who in that neighbourhood wouldn’t know the most talked-about hell-raiser of all times? And I don’t blame you a bit for reacting the way you have. For an Iranian family man, especially a God-fearing one, *aberu* and *namous* take priority over everything else. Having said that – and of course what’s done is done and as they say, *we’re destined to whatever is written on our forehead* – the community’s perspective and opinion on Joe didn’t always stay the same.’

Ebrahim looks puzzled.

Khorshidi goes on that although he too left the neighbourhood after his retirement five years later, still he was a witness to many more unorthodox incidents involving Joe than Ebrahim had been. But surprisingly, it seemed that the more the people in their community got to know this eccentric boy, the better

they understood his genuine intentions behind his unconventional deeds. As exasperated as everyone was at first by his menacing, they started to gradually appreciate his services and realise how much he was in fact needed in the community.

‘How?’

‘Simple. He was the only one who could bully the bullies of all ages, so the crooks wouldn’t dare lay a finger on anyone or anything as long as Joe was around monitoring everyone and everything. There was always something good in all the bad he did, though people usually wouldn’t see it that way at first sight.’

‘What about his schooling? As I mentioned, I left not long after they moved into the neighbourhood. Was he enrolled in our old high school?’

‘Unfortunately, yes. Believe it or not, he was one of the main reasons for my early retirement.’ Khorshidi laughs as he recalls his last years of teaching. No teacher he knew had ever seen a teenage pupil so powerful, untameable, and with so much authoritarian blood in his veins. It was as if everything and everyone was his business. The things Joe would do in school on those rare days that he’d show up would be hair-raising. And as expected he never did well in his subjects, except for maths in which he was exceptionally talented.

‘But he *did* finish high school, didn’t he?’

‘His sickly father and maternal grandmother would often beg and bribe the teachers for a passing mark on his other subjects, reasoning that without a high school diploma there would be no hope of salvation and redemption for this delinquent boy who was going further astray each day.’

‘So that’s the way he got his high school diploma?’

‘Yes. But then, as religious people like you would say, *Khoda bahash bood*, God was with him. Apparently, his genius in maths got him admitted to a top university in an engineering program, and that – I reckon – turned his life around.’

‘So I’ve heard. He is now a highly successful engineer working for one of the most prestigious firms in the country.’

‘Hmm!’

‘Has there been any other felony or crime, either in his teens or later on?’

Khorshidi explains that as Joe grew older, there was also his binge drinking and involvement with countless girls, even before he entered university. ‘Drugs were never his thing; they say he hated to become like his father, who had turned into a *teryaki*, an opium taker, after Joe’s birth and his wife’s death. Nonetheless he went all the way with his binge-drinking habit. The same goes with his living a confirmed bachelor’s life, which isn’t so unusual, considering his exceptional physiques and good looks, as well as his lack of commitment to any girl.’

Ebrahim doesn’t look thrilled, and the fact that he had already been informed of these aspects of Joe’s earlier years doesn’t make the frown on his forehead any less dense nor does it prevent him from perspiring heavily. He wipes his wet forehead with a tissue.

‘I apologise for bringing up such a —’

‘No, no. Please don’t mind me, and I appreciate your honesty.’

‘I guess I went a bit too far. These are not exactly what a man with your calibre would want to hear about someone.’

‘No. In fact, everyone has the right to a personal life of their choice. True, it may not be a lifestyle I’d choose for myself, but I never set that as a benchmark to judge others. Please go on.’

Khorshidi continues, ‘People say there were also some cases of robbery, in addition to his usual physical violence and breaking and entering, but in all cases he merely meant to bring justice where police failed, and only robbed the rich to feed the poor. He is by all means atypical, and complicated, but all in a likeable way.’

‘Yes, indeed. I’ve been a witness to his Robin Hood way of doing business with his clients myself. And just to be fair, especially now that he is not present here to defend himself, I should point out a few remarkable merits in him as well. I’d hate to see this friendly chat turn into a backbiting or a slandering session.’ Ebrahim briefly narrates all the good characteristics he is certain Joe possesses.

‘Wow. I ... what can I say? You surprise me. No wonder he doesn’t stay in jail for long. He is so needed that they get him out as soon as they can. And it

makes every sense. Who can afford to have a hero behind bars, no matter how wild and complex he is?’

Khorshidi's secretary announces the arrival of his first appointment for the day. Ebrahim excuses himself after exchanging phone numbers and a promise for later family reunions.

That was much more than Ebrahim could have asked for. With the first matter miraculously taken care of and in the fastest possible way, he moves on to deal with the rest. He never thought he would ever step into his old neighbourhood again. Who knew that one day the very same reason that drove him out of his antecedents' region would again take him back there, something he is not at all keen about and hasn't done for the past ten years?

Being in that place again, remembering all his old friends and acquaintances, the neighbours, the shops, those who might have passed away by now, and those born since then, all bring an inexplicable shiver to him in the warm spring day, a queer indecisiveness which is new to him.

It is around twelve noon, and the call to prayer, the pacifying sound of *azaan*, takes him out of his momentary daydream. He looks at his watch. Since it is recommended to do the prayers at the first possible opportunity, and preferably together in a group, he enters the mosque, and soon a lot of familiar faces gather around him to greet and welcome back their long-missed community member.

In about half an hour, there are lines of men standing behind the imam, the seventy-year-old spiritual sheikh of the mosque. They all finish the afternoon prayers and shake hands. The imam says the graces that follow the prayers. At the end he asks God for the sake of the fourteen holy figures to bestow safety, happiness, health, and wellbeing to all the main supporters of their community, particularly Mr Joe Raad. ‘May the Almighty solve all his hardships and bring him back to us in no time.’

Ebrahim looks astounded to be hearing such graces from the imam.

Soon people say their goodbyes and start leaving the mosque. Ebrahim, however, approaches the imam. ‘*Salaam, Haj agha!* It's so good to see you again, sir,’ he says, holding out his hand and bending his head in an attempt to kiss the

imam's hand, showing his utmost courtesy and humbleness towards the reputable religious scholar.

But the imam dodges and grabs Ebrahim's shoulders instead. '*Va Alaikum Assalaam*. And hello to you!' replies the imam excitedly. 'Oh, dear God! Is it really you, Mr Ebrahim Rustin, or am I dreaming? Long time, no see!'

They hug and kiss each other on the face.

During their short chat Ebrahim explains, among other things, the reasons for his unexpected return. However, he makes sure there is no mention of why he changed homes the way he did or anything about Joe's involvement in their past and present life.

'I've come to run a few errands in this neighbourhood, one of which is to ask for your advice and guidance in a matter, if I may, and if your time allows.'

The imam takes Ebrahim to a corner, where they engage in a private conversation for the next fifteen minutes.

'Then according to what you're saying, if he truly repents and never returns to the sins he committed in the past, religion allows a devout Muslim girl to marry someone with his character, right?'

'Yes, indeed.' The imam emphasises the miraculous advantages of repentance. If done genuinely, repentance is like a rebirth to an individual. It purifies the soul and washes away all the sins as if they were never committed. Even if the person has intentional or forced relapses afterwards, or worse, if he never again repents and continues with what he did before, although marrying someone with his calibre is *makrooh*, an abominable deed which is permissive in urgent situations, there is no law stopping a Muslim woman from marrying a Muslim man, regardless. 'So to answer your question, no it is not *haraam*, especially taking into account how much holy matrimony is enjoined in Islam.'

Ebrahim gets up to leave after a thankful goodbye, but turns around. 'One more thing before I leave, *Haj agha*. If I may, I also want to ask you about that person, Joe Raad, you mentioned.'

‘Ah yes. Given his foreign first name hasn’t surprised you, I get it you already know him, or have some kind of prior acquaintance with him, or at least have heard of him. Isn’t that so?’

‘Yes, *Haj agha*. He and his family had just moved into our neighbourhood when we changed homes,’ says Ebrahim, without mentioning the past few months of the Rustins’ involvement with Joe.

‘Come to think of it, you’re right. I remember now. What is your enquiry about him?’

‘Well, what you said about him in your graces took me by surprise to a great deal. Last I recall before we left this suburb, he was ...’ He searches for proper words to avoid backbiting and slander. ‘How can I say it without talking behind people’s backs and to save myself from committing *gheybat* and *tohmat*?’

‘Ha ha ha!’ The imam smiles. ‘I know what you mean, and understand where you’re coming from. Let’s just say, he was one of a kind in his deeds back then. Indeed he still is, but he is also one of our main pillars in this community, without whose support, we wouldn’t be able to function properly.’

‘I ... I was totally unaware of that,’ adds Ebrahim.

‘That is understandable, given you’ve been away for so long. You obviously haven’t had a chance to see the major transformation in this young man throughout the years.’

‘May I ask what kind of support you’re referring to?’

The imam brings out a white napkin from one of the pockets of his long brown mantle and wipes his forehead. ‘It is everything one can think of. You name it, he can either do it himself or make arrangements to have it done by others, and in no time. He is known as the six-billion-dollar maniac in this neighbourhood.’ He chuckles. ‘An unbeatable man indeed, and not just physically.’

He states that Joe has special ways of dealing with people that make them obedient and orderly, and that is what makes him a great asset. Though no one is exactly thrilled with his means of achieving his goals, they are nonetheless effective, and gradually throughout the years people have gotten used to them.

The rate of misdemeanour, offence, or any crime, even such personal cases as domestic violence, is next to none in their community, and only increases whenever he is locked up in jail. But luckily he is never imprisoned for long.

‘But as I understood you asked God for his return and to eliminate his problems. Is he in some kind of trouble and not around anymore?’

‘Not that he is not around – and certainly he does send his friends over to help out in his absence – but ...’ After a moment of reflection he continues, ‘How can I put it? A young man like him deserves the most fulfilling life, away from Satan’s traps and other hardships. And that’s why we have been including him in our graces after the prayers. I really hope that you too keep him in your special prayers, Agha Ebrahim.’

‘I most definitely will, sir!’ says Ebrahim, while his heart rate increases by the worrisome news about Joe.

Ebrahim could have used more detailed information about how Satan’s traps and other hardships have become problematic to Joe, but that is as much insight as he can expect from a spiritual sheikh who has been the confidant to the whole community for years. Besides, Ebrahim would never employ his long acquaintance with the imam to dig deeper and elicit some personal and confidential information he knows the man has sworn to secrecy. Making people go against their word or God’s command is not his thing. So he decides to leave it at that.

‘And by the way, have you visited your old house or passed by it by any chance?’ asks the imam with a concerned look.

‘No, sir. Why?’ The question further increases Ebrahim’s curiosity and anguish.

‘I guess for old times’ sake. It was no secret to anyone how much the Rustins valued their ancient home. Come to think of it, we never actually figured out why you sold it in such a hurry and —’

‘*Haj agha!*’ shouts a man, running halfway into the main prayer-hall of the mosque, saving Ebrahim just in time from a difficult inquiry. ‘So sorry to interrupt. Nothing to worry but there is an urgent call for you in the office.’

The imam excuses himself and leaves. Ebrahim heaves a sigh of relief all the while reflecting deeply on the new information. On his way out of the mosque, he sees yet another familiar figure he had in fact meant to see. He is the very same Mashd Yadollah, the mosque janitor, only with a rounder face and belly, as well as more grey hair, and a bigger bald section in the middle of his head. In his case, the passage of merely ten years has been long and cruel enough to change a middle-aged man to an old one. Mashd Yadollah recognises the newcomer immediately, even before Ebrahim says *salaam*.

After a big embrace and a quick chat, Mashd Yadollah insists on taking Ebrahim as his guest into his place, a small corner room near the washing area. He opens the door and guides Ebrahim in.

‘*Ya Allah!*’ says Ebrahim, knocking at the door before taking his shoes off.

‘No need, Agha Ebrahim. I live alone now. My wife ... I lost her to cancer two years ago, sir.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry. *Khoda rahmatesh kone*. May God bless her soul,’ says Ebrahim, going inside the room, where the smell of tea and the steam of the boiling samovar fill the air. ‘I’ve been there. I know the pain you must feel.’

The man puts his hands on his head. ‘*Khodaye nakardeh*, God forbid, has anything happened to the mother of your children?’

‘No no. She is fine. I was referring to another incident. But what about your children?’

‘They have all grown up and left,’ he says, pouring a cup of tea for his guest. ‘And a lot sooner than other people’s children. But then, considering our life and the living circumstances here, I don’t blame them. How could they have stayed longer?’

‘I suppose you’re right. Though I still have two at home, I know what you must be going through as an empty-nester.’

‘Oh, so your daughter, your eldest one with the angelic looks ... I mean ... please forgive me ... I shouldn’t have referred to her appearance, but it was no secret that —’

‘Don’t worry. I understand. Yes, my Soo just got married and ... anyway.’

Over a cup of tea, they have a heart-to-heart talk, catching up about the ups and downs of their lives in the past and the present. Ebrahim brings out a small package and puts it on the window pane.

The man is thankful and knows it is cash even before opening it. 'This reminds me of all the other alms and donations I have received in the past years in your absence, all of which I'm sure have been from you. Who else would anonymously send me birthday presents as well as *eidi* at *Norooz*, so that I'd have something to give to my children each year on their birthdays and the New Year? I know you are too pious to confirm any of this, but please allow me to at least say thank you. You and your family have been in my prayers.'

'I hope I'm not keeping you from your work.' Ebrahim changes the topic, lest any more talk on that subject takes the piety and virtue of the deed away.

'Don't worry, sir. I've finished my morning shift, and I'm actually on a break now. So, tell me what brings you by here after all these years?'

'To be frank, my main reason for being here is Joe Raad.'

'Oh.' Mashd Yadollah is taken aback and ponders.

'But then, hearing what the imam just said in his graces about him has greatly worried me.'

'Agha Ebrahim, I can definitely see how concerned you are, but before anything else, let me assure you that whatever wrong he has done to you or your family, there must be a good reason for it deep down. If you give the matter some time, you'll find out his incentive, because I doubt a man like Joe would have anything against you or a family like yours. I mean he is the master of doing the craziest things but never ever without a sound reason.'

'If your time allows, could you please tell me all that you know about this man?'

Mashd Yadollah explains, giving a full account of Joe's affairs and encounters with the community for the past ten years, which is a close match to that of the imam's and also Iraj Khorshidi's.

Ebrahim can understand all the good things Mashd Yadollah and others are saying about Joe. What confuses and worries him is why the imam would be

referring to satanic traps and the hardships Joe might be facing. And it couldn't have just been his reference to Joe Raad's lack of conformity and observance of the religious rites since everyone knows Joe hasn't observed those things as other practising Muslims do. 'It was obvious the imam didn't want to divulge any secrets, but what else can be inferred from what he implied? And that's not all. Why would he ask me whether I've seen my old house recently? I can't think of one reason for such a question. Do you know anything about this, Mashd Yadollah?'

'You've come to the right person, sir. You'd be surprised how much more information a janitor or a tea-man can have compared to others.'

'So, I've heard. But I swear I will not misuse this information in any way. You know me better.'

'Of course.' He starts after a big sigh. 'They say the man who bought your house is one of those ... what do you call ... saloka ... sakova ... those special undercover guards of the monarchy —'

'You mean SAVAK?'

'Yes, that's it.'

'My God!'

'But no one knew about this until right before the revolution. Then suddenly around the same time there was a sudden decrease in Joe's appearances at the mosque.'

'What was so unusual about that?'

'I don't mean his coming and doing a group prayer or other religious rituals. What I mean is his direct involvement and presence in all the community affairs. At first we heard that he had fallen madly in love with a girl and quit his haywire bachelor lifestyle, which was indeed great news. But then soon after, people reported seeing him going in and out of your old house nonstop.'

'Did they know why?'

Mashd Yadollah explains that except for certain people, who don't give out any inside information, no one knows what is going on in there. There are guards

on constant vigilance watching over the house day and night, preventing any unauthorised entry. And since the house-owner's true identity is now revealed to everyone, people are extremely worried and suspicious about what Joe and such a man might have in common and be involved in.

'But all the *savakis* have either left Iran or been arrested by the new government. How can he still be living there?'

Mashd Yadollah shrugs. 'No one knows. At first we thought it wouldn't take long until we knew the true story, but it has been months, and the suspense still continues. Neighbours and passers-by have heard women's voices coming from that house, some have even reported screaming sounds. '*Astaghfer Allah!* I repent to you, God!' he says, raising his hands. 'I'm not accusing anyone of anything.'

'Dear Lord! What could that mean? He can't become a tragic hero.' Ebrahim looks frightened.

'And so that's why the imam has been praying for Joe. We'd hate to see a remarkable knight go astray, especially now that there is so much hope for a promising future for him and this girl who has miraculously stolen his heart.'

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Ebrahim is off to shed light on this most puzzling phenomenon with a heavy heart, thinking of no one but Soo and Joe, and how this soon-to-be discovery will affect their lives as well as his point of view about Joe. Many passers-by recognise their old neighbour and greet him warmly. He is delighted, but still nothing can take his mind off the mission he is on.

Seeing his forefathers' old estate brings tears to his weary eyes. It looks just as outstanding, timeless, and memorable to him as it always did. Its shrubs of jasmine hanging down its tall and hefty brick walls fill his lungs with the pleasant scent of Soo's favourite household flower, as soon as he turns into the alley. He recalls his mother braiding Soo's shiny brown curls, and placing a white jasmine on each and every intertwined section, all the way down to the ends which reached the back of her knees, telling her she will make a fairytale bride one day.

He is brought back to reality when a huge muscly man blocks his way only metres from the yard door. 'Excuse me, sir. Your name, ID, and reason for being here, please.'

'I am Ebrahim Rustin,' he says, while searching for his ID in his pocket.

The man gives a surprised head-to-toe look at Ebrahim, before looking at his driver's licence.

'I've come to —'

'That's okay, sir. You may go in,' the man says, giving back Ebrahim's ID. His special treatment astounds Ebrahim. He then makes a few gestures to some invisible others in the alley and rings the doorbell, before disappearing again.

A sign above the doorframe seems to freeze the newcomer for a good few seconds. 'And I thought he was a mathematician,' he whispers.

The yard door opens. He is greeted by a middle-aged woman, who invites him in as soon as he introduces himself, as if she already knew he was coming and doesn't need his explanation for being there.

Whatever happens inside during the next ten minutes, by the time Ebrahim leaves the place, he looks nothing like his own self. He has never appeared more aghast and is more in tears than he was before. Having walked the wrong way down the alley, he changes directions and takes the opposite route, looking completely lost.

'I can't have an asthma attack here. Please God, not now,' he murmurs while taking deep breaths. 'Not only did I misjudge him terribly, I also had doubts about all his declarations.' He undoes the upper button on his shirt. 'My God, I've been an evil man all these years. How could I possibly have been so unfair in my judgment of the two extreme opposites, my worst enemy and my beloved nephew? He must truly be in love with her or he wouldn't have ...' He forces his eyes shut and tries to bring his breathing under control before continuing on his way. 'What more do I need, and how much more can a man do in his power to prove himself and his feelings? Build a Taj Mahal in my old house? What a waste it would be spending all my life on literature if I can't perceive something this

obvious. If this isn't love to the very extreme, I have never known what true love is and never will. Please forgive me, Leily!' He bursts into tears.

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Soo's temporary life and living arrangements in Qazvin for the past three days have been more than what she could have hoped for, while for the Sabri family it has been a true blessing. As promised, Soo has made one short call to her family each day, but except for the first, the other two have been only long enough to let them know she is alright. Her most recent call in particular has only lasted less than a minute. The Sabris received some unexpected guests who had to be led into the drawing room where Soo currently resides, so Soo had to cut the call short. Though the most urgent task on her agenda is to terminate her ominous marriage, she has not had enough courage to talk to her elders or leave Qazvin. She and Tahmineh, however, have made short trips around in the neighbourhood each day.

Today on her fourth day, the girls are out to run a few errands after finishing housework. Yet, Tahmineh winces at Soo's unexpected behaviour. 'Oh for heaven's sake, would you stop it? No one you know lives in this city. You've been checking your surroundings non-stop, acting like a bundle of nerves. You've never looked so restless and fidgety before, not even on our first trip out.'

'I should've trusted my instincts when I noticed them yesterday,' says Soo.

'Noticed who? Where?'

'Shhhh! And don't look around. My guts are telling me we're being watched and followed.'

'By whom?'

'A few bikies over there,' whispers Soo, raising her newly trimmed eyebrows – which are still too thick and bushy for a bride – towards a direction ahead. 'And also behind us.'

Tahmineh takes a careful peek and spots the men Soo is referring to, hefty and massive but in ordinary clothes, seemingly minding their own business at a distance.

‘Stop being paranoid! They *do* look our way occasionally, but so what?’ says Tahmineh, tugging at Soo’s veil and pulling her forward. ‘You’re just being singled out. Are you not familiar with a small town residents’ attitude towards newcomers and strangers, especially towards an odd-looking, hot dish like you?’

A couple of hours later, Tahmineh thinks twice about her theory about those men, after coming across them again in other settings, both indoors and out.

At Qazvin’s small registration bureau, after having stood in the long queue of clients, Soo returns to Tahmineh who is sitting on the busy stairway awaiting her return.

‘Just as I thought. They can’t initiate the procedures,’ says Soo with a disappointed head shake.

‘Did you tell them you have the right to *talaqh*?’

She nods. ‘There are two problems. Firstly, they said if I wanted the quickest way out, I’d be better off going straight to their main department in Tehran, which is where they will eventually send the application anyway. Secondly, I have to have both my birth certificate and marriage certificate on me ... unless ...’

‘Unless, you agree to marry the guy at the reception or his boss, as soon as your divorce is finalised?’ Tahmineh jokes.

‘Oh, stop it.’ Soo gives her an annoyed smile and a kick in the shoe. ‘Unless my legal guardian, who would be my father, goes to the bureau with his own birth certificate and my marriage certificate, and lodges the application to file for divorce on my behalf.’

‘Oh dear!’ Tahmineh narrows her eyes in disappointment.

‘Exactly. He told me to wait here until he double-checked with his boss, but the law is quite clear.’ Soo runs her fingers over her face with despair and sits on the step next to her friend. ‘How on earth can either option be possible to me? I can’t go back home. And the one person who is my key to ending this nightmare, is the last person I can approach.’

While Tahmineh reflects, Soo notices yet another one of those men with the same strapping physique, sitting on a bench on the other side of the hall, holding a

newspaper in front of his face. As their eyes meet, he goes back to reading and hiding his face behind the paper again. Soo is even more apprehensive now but keeps it to herself.

‘Well, you never know,’ continues Tahmineh. ‘You might not need to do anything. With the shocking blow they’ve had, your husband and his family might have already taken the initial steps to that end.’

‘Maybe, but it’s just as possible for this to be dragged on by Rasool till God knows when. My entitlement to the right of divorce is no guarantee that it will be handed to me without a fight.’ She confides in her friend that after what she has done she doesn’t have the courage or the strength to even face the Rustins, let alone fight for her right, especially now that every single Rustin, including her own family, is most likely taking Rasool’s side in this.

‘Either that ...’ – Tahmineh seems to have come up with a good reason to be optimistic – ‘or considering your circumstances someone else might be doing the fighting for you as we speak.’

Soo’s frightened face turns to her friend.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Soo! He is extremely shrewd, and he knows your limitations, obstacles, and needs. If you think he is just going to sit around —’

‘No. *Khoda nakone*, I hope to God that doesn’t happen. Please don’t even joke about that. He and I are already far too deep in a tangled-up mess as it is to be doing anything more fanatic and rebellious. I have asked him numerous times to stay out of this and away from me. And the limita—’

‘Sure, sure! Look at how compliant he was when you sent him the same *no* message on your wedding day. Those kidnappers must have just randomly raided —’

‘Would you stop it already?’ she says, getting up again agitated. ‘And to hell with the limitations and obstacles! Not that they don’t exist, but they have never held me back before. Why should they now? Even if they do become an obstacle, any woman can turn her life around and build a decent future for herself by focusing on the things she *can* do.’

Soo again reminds her friend of the possibility of transferring her course subjects to another university in a different city where she is entitled to dormitory facilities. She is sure it is only a matter of time until all the higher education institutions reopen. In the interim, she will be looking for a tutoring job. Tahmineh, however, is not very supportive of her plans.

‘A dorm is only a temporary solution. What happens after you graduate? As a single woman you know you can’t possibly get a place of your own and live alone. You’ll never survive the slandering behind your back. Joe does it, because he is the master of all the free-spirited things you can name; plus he is a boy. Things are never as bad when boys do them.’

‘I’ll worry about that later on, once I’m kicked out of the dormitory.’

‘I’d say you stay with us permanently. Besides, you don’t need work. If you stop wasting your gold and jewellery,’ she says, bringing her voice down lest others will hear her, ‘they are more than enough to cover all your expenses for a long while, years in fact.’

‘Please don’t start on that again. I had to do what I did, and I’d do it again if I had to. Besides, since when is there any *ta’arofing* among friends and family?’

Soo has sold some of her gold jewellery and insisted on helping the Sabris purchase a washing machine and start building a shower room, the two essentials they could definitely use in their busy household.

‘My problems lie only in unachievable goals and impossible dreams. The one thing I still haven’t found any solution to,’ says Soo, getting tears in her eyes, ‘is how to come to terms with ... or put behind those most beautiful ...’ She presses a tissue on her eyes.

Tahmineh pats her on the shoulder. ‘Just give it some more time.’

‘Easier said than done. Has the world ever seen victims more innocent than they? They never chose to be born into ...’

‘I know.’

‘I swear to God, not a single night passes by that I don’t have some type of nightmare about them. This unknowing ... all the unanswered questions ... my

helplessness in doing anything for them, not even for the remaining ones ...’ She starts crying.

‘It’s okay.’

‘Will I ever be able to move on and stop hurting? Will they ever become a part of my past?’ She shakes her head. ‘I honestly don’t think so.’ She tries to get a hold of her emotions. ‘Sorry to have kept you waiting here.’

‘Are you kidding? If you hadn’t ruined it with your news about the divorce, this was in fact doubly enjoyable for me. An outing without any chores left at home to think about is total relaxation to me. I swear we’d keep you forever if you could stay with us permanently. I get to sleep in every day for as long as I want, while my in-laws enjoy an untiring helping hand around the household without needing to exhaust their vocal cords getting me out of bed. Who wouldn’t want a godsend miracle-worker as a guest?’

The receptionist comes out of his office holding a letter and calls Soo back with a hand gesture. Tahmineh watches how Soo has a quick read of the letter and turns red in the face almost instantly. The man sitting on the bench gets up alarmed and puts his newspaper away.

Soo tears up the letter, throws the pieces in the receptionist’s face, giving him a disgusted, infuriated look, and rushes back to Tahmineh. ‘We’re out of here.’

Tahmineh follows, having a hard time keeping a straight face. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

‘What do they think? That just because I’m about to get a divorce, I’d be willing to ... My God! What more can a woman do in this country to protect herself from her number one enemy, patriarchal men?’

‘So, was the offer for himself or for his boss?’

‘Doesn’t matter, and it isn’t funny. It is the misery I’ve had to put up with all my life. *You have your hands on the flames from a distance*. Others get the warmth, while I get the burns.’

‘I hate *to sprinkle salt on your wound*, but as you know, it will only get worse, so you’d better get used to it.’ She explains her mindreading of the male

population. What these men are assuming is that as a soon-to-be divorcee, Soo is not a virgin anymore. And with that restraining barrier lifted, it isn't just the legitimate and genuine marriage proposals she'll be receiving from now on. It is unfortunate, but it is the reality facing every divorced woman. 'And with the looks you've got, you do the maths.'

On their way out, as Tahmineh stops at a bubbler tap before the exit, the same burly man passes them by without any attention to the girls. Soo notices him but keeps quiet.

Tahmineh, however, speaks up. 'That does it. I am a hundred percent sure now.'

'Sure of what?'

'I hate to break more bad news to you, but I think you're right about those men. I mean the ones you thought were following us. That guy who just passed us by was in the main hall sitting on a bench and having an indirect but watchful eye on you this whole time. And now that we're leaving, so is he.'

'Yes, I noticed him too.'

'How on earth could anyone have found out where you are? Do you think your own family has put them up to this or ...?'

'If they were bounty hunters to take me back home, they wouldn't be wasting time watching their target move around freely. They'd get the job done immediately.'

'So ... you think they've been sent after you by *Joe*?'

'I don't just think so. I'm sure of it.'

Tahmineh looks baffled.

Soo clarifies. 'He knows I don't want him near me, so this is his way of making sure I am protected in his absence in case others find me and cause problems for me.'

'I see. No wonder the man sprang to his feet when the receptionist came out to talk to you. My God, didn't I tell you Joe is the extreme end of prudence and

shrewdness? I'm telling you, Soo, it is very unlikely for him not to be pulling some strings behind the scene to your advantage.'

On their way back home, a woman passes them by, carrying a young child, no older than six months of age. One glance at the baby's face and Soo is suddenly stricken. '*Marjan?* Was that Marjan I saw?' She turns around and goes after the woman.

'Here we go again.' Tahmineh rolls her eyes and runs after her.

Soo stops the woman with a gentle pat on her shoulder. 'Excuse me, ma'am! *Salaam!* Your baby ... I mean ...'

'What about my baby?' The mother checks her child anxiously. 'Anything wrong with her?' She pulls back the child's loose hat to have a better view of her face, which in turn reveals the baby's straight black hair.

'No, she can't be Marjan,' says Soo inaudibly.

'Pardon!'

'No, no, nothing is wrong,' adds Soo, as if she has just been startled out of a daydream. 'My apologies! She is very very lovely. You are both very lucky to have each other. May God always protect you!' says Soo. 'It's just that ... I thought your baby —'

Tahmineh comes in between, pushing Soo back. 'Your daughter reminded her of a baby she once ... Never mind! Sorry to have bothered you.'

'That's okay.' The woman reflects while checking Soo out thoroughly with much remorse and bewilderment. She then turns to Tahmineh. 'There is a holy shrine of an *emamzadeh*, a descendant of an imam, not far from here. May God bless her with as many children as she wishes, and all of them with her own looks!'

'She is not infertile. She's just ... But thank you anyway. Have a good day, ma'am!' Tahmineh pulls Soo back in the opposite direction. 'What in God's name is the matter with you? This is the second time in four days you ... How on earth could she have possibly been Marjan, even if Marjan would still be ...?' Being mindful of her friend, Tahmineh cuts herself short.

‘I don’t know what got into me again,’ says Soo, in an apologetic tone. ‘Marjan had tiny springlike curls, and besides she was that baby’s size four months ago. She’d be walking now had she not been ...’ Soo wipes the fresh tears off her eyes. ‘I only realised I was mistaken when her mother removed the hat. There was so much resemblance that I thought maybe ... Oh, God, what would I do to see that little angel alive one more time, or any one of them?’

She starts crying bitterly, resting her head on her friend’s shoulder and bringing tears to Tahmineh’s eyes as well.

‘I know how you feel.’

The two hug, remembering the lost orphans.

‘I can’t go on like this. I’m losing it, Tamie. I need to find out all that there is about the survivors of that fire, and there is no stopping me, not this time.’

‘Are you listening to yourself, Soo?’ She gives a gentle shake to Soo’s shoulders. ‘You have too much on your plate at the moment. Give yourself some time, and think things through before endangering yourself. Besides, has he not made it perfectly clear that he doesn’t want you to —’

‘That was then. With Rasool out of my life, he has no reason to hide them from me anymore. If I really mean that much to him, if he is the man I think he is, he won’t deprive me of the children who are a permanent part of my life, and are constantly on my mind day and night.’

‘Remember that this is just a phase which —’

‘Not for me, it isn’t. There is no phase to this eternal hell, no cure to this open wound, at least not until I know every single detail about each and every one of them.’

‘You’re scaring me. What exactly do you intend to do?’

‘What else? I’m calling Joe. Not him directly, but his grandmother.’

‘Way to go! The most impulsive attempt at the worst possible time. If he is the one managing the surviving infants’ affairs, he must be keeping them somewhere within his own proximity in Tehran. That’s the last city you want to

be in right now. What if you're spotted and followed, or even taken away by someone who knows you?'

'We don't have to worry about Joe finding out my hiding place anymore now, do we? And as for others, any risk regardless of its consequences is better than the hell I'm in right now. God willing, with his vigilant men around me watching me round the clock, I'll be alright.'

Tahmineh exhales a long puff, analysing her friend's decision as she follows her home.

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As thrilled as Farah is to be hearing from the one girl who has cast the incredible spell on her unruly grandson, Soo's second call is not as surprising to Farah as it is to Soo.

Having briefly indicated her ongoing grief for the children, Soo swallows a big lump in her throat. 'You're a very smart woman to have read my mind about this call, Ms Farah. Saving me from getting into more painful details about my relationship with them shows your thoughtfulness and considerateness above all,' says Soo with a trembling voice over the phone.

Farah's reply, however, contradicts Soo's initial assumption.

'Oh, *he* did? How did he know I'd be asking you such a ... never mind. I should know by now that he ...' Soo cuts herself short. 'Nonetheless, I'm grateful to you both. I guess now that he is okay with me seeing them, I suppose he's also told you their location, right?'

But the next piece of information from Farah isn't something Soo would be jotting down. The pen slips out of her hand as she cups her mouth and chin.

'*What!?* You can't be serious. Is this a joke or some kind of a game he —'

Seeing the look of astonishment on Soo's face, the curious Tahmineh puts her ear to the receiver.

Soo continues, 'So, that's just it? You can't tell me what this means, and neither can he? ... No, they haven't told me anything. How could my family know about this when I don't?' Soo explains her contact arrangement with her

maiden household: only one short call a day, and that is only if Sara or Salman pick up the phone. Except for her first call in which her sister narrated the aftermath of her escape, she has refrained from any conversation with them, especially with her elders.

Soo is further taken aback by Farah's reference to the previous night.

'No, again nothing. Just as I said *salaam* to my sister over the phone last night, I was interrupted by some guests and had to hang up abruptly. I mean she *did* say my family was eager to speak to me and asked me to call back, but nothing new there. That's always been the case, whereas I don't have the face or the courage to talk to anyone else in my family.'

Farah still keeps her reticence in regard to the recent incident between the Raads and the Rustins, and except for the children's address she doesn't divulge anything else to Soo. She only emphasises the importance of Soo's keeping in touch with her elders.

Before they end the conversation Soo brings it to Farah's attention that time and space are still essential to her, and she greatly appreciates it if her grandson continues to respect her solitude and keeps his distance from her while she visits the children, whenever that might be.

As Tahmineh has expected, with the children's location revealed there is now no stopping Soo, despite the unanswered question of *why there of all the places* still hovering around their heads. Even in light of the two-hour trip each way ahead of her, along with her self-imposed obligation to return to Qazvin at night, she hates to wait until the following morning, which would also allow her more time with the children. As such, Tahmineh knows standing in her determined friend's way when she is about to leave around two pm will be a futile attempt, yet as her last resort she still gives that a go.

'Fine, go ahead, but here's the picture. We're talking a good two-hour ride there and at least a couple of hours meeting with the children you haven't seen for ages. The earliest you can head back will be six pm, which will be after dark,' says Tahmineh, watching Soo briskly get ready to leave. 'Regardless of whatever, you *do* know that the heartthrob will be there and you also know that —'

'No, he won't. Didn't you hear what I just asked his grandma?'

‘Mark my words, he’ll be there, and he won’t be thrilled about the idea of you moving across cities at night. Why would you intentionally put yourself in a position which will give him a good excuse to think of a place for you for the night? He is obviously not going to take you to your father’s or other relatives’ home, and no doubt his proposed alternative solutions to the problem will be breathtakingly passionate. But is that what you’re after, creating such a —’

Soo is in too much of a hurry to argue against Tahmineh’s maddening assumption, and interrupts her by heading out and closing the door behind her, after shooting her a glare.

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Two hours later, Soo gets out of a cab in a neighbourhood full of memories she never thought any Rustin would step in ever again. So much has changed since a decade ago as far as her memory can take her back, yet there is plenty that has stayed just the same, like the alley she is passing through right now where Joe carried her home on his back, his one and only offensive deed against the Rustin dynasty which marked the ancient enmity between the two men she dearly adores. There is far too much she can be fascinated about if only she had the time and didn’t have one main thing on her mind, the little angels.

She reaches the place where Joe has wanted her to be, with a few big built men not far. She is now standing outside the door to a house she and her family used to call home ten years ago, right where Ebrahim was standing only a few hours ago on this very day. A shiny ceramic tile on the door-head catches her attention, immediately making her heart race. It reads *Yousef's Sooreh*, and the wordplay takes her breath away. At first glance, the phrase can only be interpreted by the public as a well-known Qur’anic surah named after the Prophet Joseph. At the same time, those aware of the story of Sooreh Rustin and Yousef Raad can derive an underlying meaning, which touches all her senses. Will Sooreh ever be Yousef’s?

She takes a moment to get a grip on herself, trying to stop the tears that are on their way, before her shivering hand sounds the doorbell. A different woman opens the door this time.

‘*Salaam,*’ says Soo.

‘*Salaam be rooye maahet!* Hello to your moonlike face! My goodness, I’ve never seen a face so bright or so beautiful.’ One look at Soo and the woman, who introduces herself as Fakhri, takes her inside before Soo gets a chance to say who she is or explain why she is there. ‘Finally, the woman of the hour is here,’ announces Fakhri. Soon a group of women, all in a black and white uniform, gather on the terrace to greet the newcomer.

Soo is speechless, looking around with her mouth hanging open.

‘Your looks tell us you can’t be anyone but the one person our master has been waiting for all these months,’ Fakhri continues.

‘I’m ... Soo, Sooreh Rustin. Nice to meet you all.’

‘Oh, so you must be related to Mr Ebrahim Rustin, who visited us just a few hours ago,’ says another woman.

‘That would be my father. You mean my father was here in this very house?’

‘Yes, but only for a short ten to fifteen minutes,’ the woman adds. ‘Mr Raad had recently notified us that a man with his name and features might stop by. As for you, although he has never revealed your name, we’ve been waiting for months to see who this mystery woman is he keeps referring to.’

Fakhri continues, ‘Sorry to be overwhelming you with all this. We’d better go back to our work and give you some time alone. Please do come inside whenever you’re ready.’

Soo only nods while taking in all the new information she is bombarded with from all directions. ‘But why? Why would my dad be coming here?’ she murmurs. ‘There are things I don’t know. Is that why Ms Farah kept telling me to talk to my elders?’

The house looks untouched as if no alterations have been made since the Rustins moved out. All around the yard what meets the eye are piles and piles of children’s essentials and furniture covered up by plastic layers. There are dozens of clotheslines full with children’s washed laundry. But what makes her go weak at the knees is the sight of over twenty beautiful tiny faces through the glass wall

of the Rustin's old living room facing the terrace, many more than she had hoped to find alive. 'There they are. Please God, don't let this be just a dream, and if it is, please don't ever let me wake up.'

Soo runs up the staircase and into the building with tears already rolling down her high cheekbones and flushed face. She can easily spot Parvaneh, then Shiva, and Maryam, and Saeed, and many more, all of whom look not only bigger but also far happier than they did a few months ago with more living space, over twenty carers, and all the new facilities at their service. The world and time watch Soo make history and break all previous records of how much love and affection a nonblood-related woman can bestow on some of God's most helpless human beings. She continues her joyous cuddles, kisses, tickles, and all the fun she and her newly found angels can possibly share together, and tries hard not to think of the rest of the infants she misses greatly but can't see among the survivors, one of whom is Marjan.

'Sorry to interrupt your moment, dear!' says one of the carers wiping her own tears and patting Soo on the shoulder. 'But just to let you know there are also other babies whom I'm sure you'd want to visit just as well.'

The new information runs a gush of fresh blood in her veins, yet she feels numb. 'Other babies?' She gently puts down the children she has on her back and her lap. 'You mean there's more?'

The women nod, as they lead her towards a bigger area which used to be the Rustins' drawing room. Soo nearly faints at the entrance as she lays eyes on many more of the missing infants. 'This can't be real. There is no way. Please tell me this is a dream. I can't afford to lose them again if they are just illusions made up in my wishful mind.'

The carers are all in tears while Soo receives her answer by a group of crawling babies and toddlers finding their way towards the newcomer and tugging at the tips and lower parts of her veil. She sits on the floor, embracing them all and shedding happy tears. She takes a careful look at each and every one. There is no burnt scar, no permanent harm, and no disability, as far as she can see. They are as healthy as they have always been. The carers also confirm her assumption.

Yet there is still no sign of Marjan and some others, and Soo can't help asking about them.

'I understand that you don't know them by their real names, and I hate to bring up a painful topic, especially now that I have so much more than I can ever be thankful for, but can anyone tell me about the lost ones who —'

'Before you say anything, there are still more children upstairs you haven't seen.'

'No. This is impossible,' says Soo, swallowing a big lump in her throat, as a few carers lead the way to the second level. 'Exactly how many children have you got here?'

'One hundred and four.'

'What!?'

'Ninety-six babies and eight toddlers.'

Soo seems to freeze halfway up the stairs with no strength left in her knees to carry her. 'But ... that would be all of them ... all the ninety-six infants we had at the orphanage before the fire. You mean he ... No, there must be some mistake about their ages. He couldn't have possibly saved all the infants, plus a group of toddlers.'

But there has been no mistake. No words can describe Soo's extreme jubilation as she finally reaches up and reunites with not just a portion but all her missing beloveds, including Marjan whose springlike curls have grown much longer now that she is older. 'I must have died after they did. I must be visiting them in the afterlife. There can be no other explanation for this miracle.' The world can end and time can stop right there and then for all she cares, except that she is deeply beholden to a saviour for this unbelievable paradise she is in.

Based on what the carers tell her, the whole place is managed and financially run by Joe. There are usually around twenty-five carers, along with other staff who help out with the washing, cooking, and cleaning. Joe and some of his men do the shopping and run the outside errands. It hasn't been easy keeping the place running. Joe is constantly faced with plenty of legal issues related to guardianship, licensing, insurance, registration and ownership of the property, and

the like, with various government organisations, all of which he has managed to put on hold, waiting to hear from the one person who he says cares the most about these children.

Joe had initially kept the children's existence a secret from the authorities as he wasn't sure that a government in the midst of so much administrative chaos in the aftermath of the revolution would be able to do anything for some orphans, other than just dispersing them to different locations at the most, and that was not what he wanted. Later on when he finally notified them, just as he had guessed, the government people were uncooperative and noncompliant at first. But once they found out about his miraculous rescue of the children and also checked out the place and their wellbeing, they agreed to his terms and authorised him to keep them. They realised that even putting aside saving their lives, what he has provided for these children is far better than what the government ever could.

There have also been some genuine adoption offers. However, he hasn't allowed any of the children to be relocated or transferred, asserting that he is morally bound to keep them all together until the person who loves them the most shows up and decides for their future. They were told that these kids meant the world to someone who lived for them, and so he wouldn't give any one of them up without her consent. Though he never named that person, they are now certain who she is.

As touching and valuable as these findings are, Soo is still in the dark about why the ancient Rustin house has been chosen for this purpose, where its real owner and occupants are, and what her father was doing there today.

Soo is far too submerged in all the love she is surrounded by to be able to keep track of time, as if she is never meant to be separated from the little ones ever again, and as though there is no Qazvin to head back to. It is only after the children's last feeding and before putting them to bed that the unmistakable zoom of Joe's bike makes her look at her watch. It's past eight. Not only has she not left yet, but she hasn't done her evening prayers yet either, nor has she ended her fasting.

'That would be the Master. I'll get it,' says Moneer, one of the carers, going to the door.

‘But it seems to me like he made a stop somewhere on his way here,’ says Soo.

‘That’s because he switches his engine off at a distance before turning into this alley lest the noise disturbs the children.’

Standing behind the tall French windows facing the terrace, Soo watches Moneer open the yard door to its entirety. Joe enters with a large covered load on his motorbike, followed by a couple of his men in a van just as full with some stuff for the orphans. Soo moves to a corner to be out of their sight, though she can still see everything through the sheer chiffon curtains. They unload the vehicles in a flash, transferring the goods into the basement, and the van leaves. Joe uncovers his load, which turns out to be containers of formula, and dashes upstairs swiftly, carrying them under his arms, as though they are just some empty boxes.

Fakhri goes to the terrace, but her warm greetings are interrupted by him.

‘I’ve got to go. Tell the visitor I wouldn’t have come if I knew she were here,’ says Joe, leaving the load at the entrance and heading back to his bike.

He nearly bumps into Shamsi, who steers her laundry basket clockwise to give way to the hurried Joe. ‘Don’t you want to check on the children, sir?’ she asks.

‘Not today, trusting there is no urgency.’ But before he takes his bike out of the yard, an unexpected voice stops him.

‘Wait!’ says Soo.

After a quick look to her on the terrace from the corner of his eyes, he turns around to face her, trying hard not to stare as she descends the steps. ‘Look, this isn’t what it looks like. I thought you’d be either gone by now or coming tomorrow. There have been communication problems among the team ... some technical issues with our ... anyhow I only found out you’re here minutes ago, or I wouldn’t have shown up.’

‘I meant to leave much earlier, but I lost track of time. I should be going actually,’ says Soo, looking at her watch.

Respecting their need for privacy Shamsi excuses herself to head inside, but Soo asks her to stay. She is dumbfounded, yet complies and starts folding the laundry as she sits on the upper step.

Soo continues, 'Time, distance, space, and all such entities lose their meaning when one is in a different world. But that's not why I came after you to tell you.'

He uses the bike keys to scratch his right ear while shooting her a serious look.

'I don't know where to begin, where to end, or how to express how I feel right now. There are eighty-one little girls and twenty-three little boys in there,' she says, pointing at the building behind her. 'I am —'

'You've got any problems with the illogical ratio, go blame the ridiculous patriarchal culture, not me!'

Taking a second or two to absorb his sarcastic humour, she continues, 'I'm simply speechless, and besides you already know better than anyone else all the admirable things you have done.' She wipes her wet face with her hands. 'That's all of the ninety-six infants we had in the Welfare building, plus eight toddlers. I can't tell you how happy I am to see them all alive and well. Neither can I put into words how this whole paradise makes me feel about ...' she trails off.

'About me,' Joe completes her sentence. 'You don't have to. It's written all over your face. According to what I've heard from your friend about you, this is where you'd be running to me and giving me the biggest hug ever, not wanting to be an inch away from me, had we been married and *mahram* to one another, right?'

Soo is already covering her blushing face with her hand and cursing her friend. 'Damn you, Tahmineh!'

Joe looks away. 'Sorry I ...'

Shamsi looks just as uncomfortable to be present. She clears her throat and again attempts to leave, but Soo presses on her shoulder and asks her to stay just a bit longer.

She continues, 'I've always believed that there are more ways than we think to reach God and His paradise. But I know now for sure that certain people's way is by far the most righteous one, as well as the fastest.'

Joe's frown shows he is perplexed.

'Because theirs is also the most dangerous of all. Not many people put their life on the line to right wrongs and save lives.'

'Still that doesn't mean certain people are suicidal maniacs who don't care about their own lives and happiness. Whatever might await them in the afterlife doesn't change their yearning to reach the worldly paradise they're looking at right now.' He immediately turns around, realising he is out of line again. 'Sorry, "certain people" had better be out of your way before they ...' he says, still jokingly mimicking Soo's shy way of addressing him. He takes a hold of his bike handles to leave, despite all the perceptible reluctance on his face. 'They might even remind others of a peculiar eight-year-old who put her life on the line to save —'

'No, you stay if you want. I was just on my way out,' Soo interrupts him. She runs inside and comes back with her purse.

'Look, I know you've just made the utmost substantial decision by leaving that arranged marriage, and I don't mean to be pressuring you or rushing you about us. However, in regard to these children, there are more decisions to be made and steps to be taken, all of which are pending your attention and presence.'

'I know. The carers told me all the difficulties you are facing day in and day out. But I can't do anything until I'm divorced. In front of God, not only am I still a married woman, I've also gone against my elders' wish, an unforgivable deed no Rustin bride has ever done in our dynasty. The last thing I need is to become more sinful. Not everyone is a hero to endure burning flames and come out unharmed.'

'If you are to ever enter hell, it will be when hell freezes over,' he says, playfully. 'I hear you were majoring in sports. From now on whenever this nonsense comes to your mind, divert your attention to winter sports like skiing, ice-skating, and all the rest you can enjoy in your frozen hell.'

Soo bites her lips to hide her grin. She then brings a full plastic bag out of her purse. 'These are some gold and jewellery given to me at the wedding. I want you to take them. God knows how much you've already spent on these chil—'

'Put those back. I don't need any financial help.'

'This is the least I can do to cover a small portion of —'

'I *said* I don't need them. The last thing you want is to get into more trouble with your in-laws. They might well be asking you for those.'

'They are too rich to be stepping on their pride. Besides, I'm a relative, not a stranger. As Ebrahim Rustin's daughter, they owed me a wedding present anyway, no matter who I married.'

'Still, I'm not going to touch those. Since when does a woman pay for anything in a man's company anyway? Is there no limit to your eccentricity?'

Soo does what she is told. 'Speaking of eccentricity, how about the fact that I'm thrown deep into this ocean of baffling surprises without any explanation? How on earth did you do such an incredible thing?'

'Incredible is within my category of general terms. You need to be more specific.'

'Fair enough. How about, how can all these children possibly be alive?'

'It doesn't matter.' He shakes his head, looking and sounding indifferent.

'It does to *me*. I am still terrified that any minute I am going to wake up from this unbelievable dream. It would have been a miracle for me to see even a few alive, whereas you've got every single infant, as well as eight toddlers, out of the fire. It's only natural for others to be wondering why none of the infants were among the casualties.'

'If you're in any way implying that my inner personal feelings tend to make me biased towards those I save, you're dead wrong. I admit you and your permanent bond with the infants were in my mind all through it, but that doesn't mean I was being selective in my rescue and ignored the rest. I would've saved them all if I could.'

'I never doubted that, but still ...'

After a deep sigh of sadness and running his fingers through his blond wavy hair – which covers the back of his neck – he sits at the edge of the empty swimming pool to narrate the heartbreaking catastrophe. He wasn't notified about the fire until very late. When he got there, some of the children on lower levels had already lost their lives, and the rest – mostly older ones – had either been taken out by the staff or had run out on their own. The city was at its worst pre-revolutionary upheaval that night, confronted by the military curfew, the militants, the blackout, the shootings, the bloodshed, and the government's guards everywhere. All hell had broken loose with no rescuers except for a small firetruck and only a couple of firefighters too scared of losing their own lives to be saving anyone else's.

He continues his narration, holding his neck in his hands. 'When the firefighters saw me, they told me to stay away as the building was about to collapse. I went out of their sight and found my way in through the roof from the back alley.'

The fire had been started by protestors on the street, and infants being on the highest level were the luckiest as they were the farthest away from the flames. He had to leave the rescued ones all alone on the cold, bare grounds of the back alley to go look for the rest, not knowing what would happen to either group in his absence, but that's all he could do at that point. Then luckily four of his team members made it there and took the outside infants into a few cars and a truck parked nearby. To make sure there were no remaining children on the fourth floor he asked his men to count the children. When they informed him that they had ninety-six on board, he was certain that was all of the infants in the orphanage. Noticing the emergence of some of his other mates, he went in to look for the rest, hoping he and his new rescue force would be of help to the rest on other levels.

He swallows a big lump in his throat as he continues, 'The third floor was a different story. It wasn't just the flames. The place was filled with suffocating dark fumes. I brought out the unconscious toddlers, who were in the hallway and the staircase. But, seconds after I went inside again to search the rooms on that floor, the flames brought the whole building down. It was all too late to do anything else. I was only able to pull myself out alive, and my mates never even made it inside. That's the only reason we couldn't save any more lives that day.'

There is a short silence while they both ponder the severity of the adversity. Shamsi too is in tears, despite looking away and being busy with the laundry load.

‘I see,’ says Soo, sniffing. Still, no one could have possibly done what you and your team have, and especially you. Without you they would be all dead.’

‘Now that your enquiring mind has been satisfied ...’ he says, releasing the side-stand switch of his bike to leave.

‘One more thing, please.’

Joe turns around again.

‘Why here? Why of all the places you could have taken them, you’ve chosen *the* Rustin house? Where are its real owner and occupants? I can’t think of one rational incentive behind this. If you want me to relive the memories of my childhood in this house, it is working, but it is also reviving the painful memories of what ignited the enmity between the two men who mean ...’ Soo looks embarrassed having started a sentence she doesn’t seem to be able to finish.

‘I can’t answer that.’

‘Why not?’

He sighs. ‘Look, not that I want to pressure you in any way, but so much has been going on that you don’t know about, and you most definitely should. Still, I’m not the right person to inform you of all that. You need to talk to your family.’

‘Why do people keep referring me to them? First Ms Farah and now you? Are you not aware of my lost face in front of the Rustins?’

‘A lot has changed. It’s not like what you think anymore.’

‘I don’t get it. Are you telling me that my family knows the reason for this utter surprise of yours?’

‘I heard your father was here earlier; so yes they all must know by now. But since you mentioned that you refrain from any contact with them, it’s obvious you’re not updated. A word of advice: talk to them, and think twice before calling your two most favourite men enemies ever again.’

He then faces Shamsi. 'The vaccination team will be here at ten am tomorrow. Have them call me at my office as soon as they arrive. For those who start running a fever, the new meds are in the basement fridge.'

'Yes, sir!' replies Shamsi.

He faces Soo again who is now right at the door and about to leave. 'Leave if you want but not on my account. As you can see, I'm heading out, and I never spend the night here.'

'I'd love to stay longer, but I need to make it back on time to do my prayers. Had you not shown up, I would've missed it altogether, being busy with the babies.'

Joe looks at his watch. 'It's already eight-thirty and you've got a two-hour ride ahead. The slightest unexpected delay and your prayer will be *ghaza*. And who else but me will you be cursing for this sin?'

'I won't. I'll stop at a mosque if I get held up by traffic or —'

'With that much gold and jewellery? Are you out of your mind or seriously suicidal? You think it's only the Rustins and the other true Muslims who step into mosques?' he snaps at her. 'And I bet you've been fasting and haven't eaten yet either.'

'I've brought a sandwich. I'll have it on my way back.'

He leaves his bike and approaches Soo. 'I don't care if you hate me for this, but ...' He heads upstairs, tugging at her veil and taking her with him.

'Excuse me?' Soo is taken aback, but since her veil is being pulled, she has to follow.

Passing by the children, whose heads turn towards them like sunflowers following the sun, they reach a closed door up on the second level.

'I'm sure this room rings a bell,' says Joe, trying to find a key in his oversized keyring.

'Yes. It ... but why?'

'It used to be your room, didn't it?'

Soo's heart starts racing. 'How would you know?' she mutters.

He opens the door to a mind-blowing sight and goes in, while the astonished Soo remains at the entrance with an agape mouth. The room is elegantly furnished with all new furniture, yet what takes her breath away is the undeniable resemblance between everything she sees and everything she used to have there, ten years ago, each placed in their very spot.

'It isn't exactly the very same, but at least it is similar to what you were familiar with,' says Joe.

Soo's eyes have only gotten wider. A constant headshake is all the response she can give, confronted by too many perplexities and surprises for one day to be able to comment on anything else.

'Oh, and your wedding shoes are inside that wardrobe.' He fetches them and comes over to Soo. 'My mates found them when they were searching for you, and so ...'

The two exchange glances.

'Nice escape, by the way,' he says, admiringly.

'Sorry to disturb you, sir.' A carer's voice is heard behind her. Soo moves out of her way. 'If you have the time, as you can hear —'

'How many?' asks Joe.

'Only nine.'

'And they're all ready? Fed, changed, and burped?'

'Of course, sir!'

'I'll be there in a minute.'

'Thank you, sir,' says the carer, bowing to Joe and then heading back to another area.

He puts the shoes back. 'Forget about your questions and just do your prayers for now and eat,' he says, taking out a prayer rug from a dresser drawer and spreading it on the pink rug. Soo can see her own *tasbeeh* right there next to the *mohr* even before he picks it up. 'By the way, Parvaneh grew all her front

baby teeth. I've been saving this for you. And you were absolutely right about its magic touch.' He puts it back and gets up. 'There are snacks and nibbles here inside the wardrobe, and also in the kitchen. I need to go take care of a few colicky babies. Feel free to lock the door from inside if you want,' says Joe, as he leaves the room.

As hard as Soo tries to concentrate, all through her prayers she is in total confoundment about what to make of the series of surprises coming her way today, as well as surfing through the glimpses of all her childhood memories in that room. She checks out her surroundings. Except for the *tasbeeh* and the wedding shoes, everything is brand new and untouched. The bed looks like her very own one which seems to have only grown as its owner has, with the same peach-colour linen. The dresser and the wardrobes contain a decent supply of all the essentials for a woman her age, from free-size clothing and accessories to toiletry and stationery, even snacks.

Soo heads down the stairs, bumping into one of the carers who is on her way up with a big tray of food for the special guest. She thanks her for the food but only drinks half a glass of milk, saying she needs to leave. Most children are put to sleep, and the restless screamers cannot be heard any longer. An enormous hammock, which had previously caught her attention and stunned her in Khanom Jaan's old room at the back, is now in use, but not in an ordinary way.

'Uhhh! *Vai Khoda!*' says Soo, slapping herself on the lips. She is shocked to see it being swung by Joe as wide as the width of the big room allows, and reaching halfway to its high ceiling, with nine children on board, like big fish in a fishing net, firmly secured and all sound asleep.

The carer puts the tray down and pats Soo on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, they'll be fine. We were just as petrified as you are the first time we saw it, but as you can see, it works like magic.'

'You haven't seen anything yet,' says another carer quietly. 'You'd be amazed at the things he does around here. I mean his way of dealing with the children and his awkward management methods. They're just as rough and tough as he is, yet the children adore him regardless.'

‘Huh, you can say that again. They don’t even come to us when he is around,’ confirms Fakhri, passing them by.

Soo says a quick goodbye to the staff and expresses her warm thanks for their kind and caring assistance with the children. She then hurriedly puts her shoes back on and heads down.

If he is ever willing to do so, he has a long way to go to explain all the bewilderments which are constantly being piled up on her mind about how, when, and why he had ever stepped in her childhood room without anyone’s knowledge or consent. Yet she is already too overwhelmed for one day, and can’t think of a wiser thing to do than leave. His deep voice jolts her.

‘I did my best to make everything as similar and familiar as I could remember it,’ says Joe. ‘I’d hate to see you leave like this. If you wait a moment, I will end this suspense and confusion for you.’

She looks reluctant but stops on the bottom step with an audible sigh.

He starts the backstory of that momentous day. ‘That day when you twisted your ankle under that car, and I carried you home on my back, do you remember those jerks appearing on our way, who wanted to take revenge on me by hurting not only me but also you, thinking we were somehow related?’ He climbs down the steps.

‘So what? And I didn’t get hurt. You protected me, and none of their rocks hit me. You were the one that got hurt ... at first, and then you beat the living daylights out of them.’

‘Exactly. After I hid you under that washing lady’s metal colander and went after them, it was them who got badly injured.’

‘And now what? Years later, you’ve got your hands on them again, and as the remaining part of their punishment you’ve forced them to do all this, so that you can further surprise and impress me? The only flaw in that theory would be that they were total strangers. None of them had ever stepped into this house or into my room.’

Joe chuckles while shaking his head, and as for Soo, the spontaneous burst of her sudden sarcasm in front of a nonrelated man makes her blush.

‘Do you also recall what you did with that bag of meat your mother had sent you to buy?’

She looks embarrassed and uncomfortable. ‘Any woman knows the medicinal benefits of raw red meat applied to wounds and bruises. I would have done it for anyone in that situation, let alone for you. If you hadn’t had your hands full with me, no way they could have dared to come near *the Joe*.’

‘But not every eight-year-old would have done what you did. And I wish you hadn’t.’

She now looks frustrated as her confusion increases by the minute.

Joe continues, ‘I couldn’t stop thinking that if a child of that age spends her entire bag of meat on a stranger, hoping it would alleviate his suffering – the suffering he denies, and only *she* thinks he has – this extraordinary perspective sends an unmistakable message across about her extraordinary personality.’

‘As I said it wasn’t a big deal. No benevolent act remains unrewarded by God. My mother found twice as much meat in the fridge the following morning, the meat she swore she hadn’t seen there before. I was sure it was God’s way of compensating us for ...’ Something hits Soo right then. She winces as she realises what might have actually happened. ‘Or ... was it ...’

‘Yes, *I* brought that meat.’

‘My God! Is that also how you ...?’ asks Soo in a pensive mood.

‘Let me first clear any misunderstandings. I was barely thirteen. I hadn’t reached the religious cut-off year of fifteen yet. My grandma had been telling me the Islamic dos and don’ts forever. I knew it wouldn’t be religiously forbidden if I saw you or your other females without covers.’

‘But why and how?’

‘As a young boy, I guess I was too curious and impressed to stay away. Also – I don’t know, for some strange reason – I needed to check up on your ankle. If you open the window next time you’re up there in your room, you will see how my climbing axe has scraped the bricks outside the window pane.’

Soo winces. 'So you took pictures of me and my room or somehow filmed —'

'No, I swear I only remembered everything as it was. Once I saw you were sound asleep with your ton of curls covering more of your bed than your body was, and obviously not in pain, I found my way to the kitchen, put the meat in the fridge, and left.'

'Has there been any more of such —'

'As God is my witness, no. Not long after, your father moved homes and, knowing how he felt about me, I figured it'd be best not to show up in your lives or mess with such a noble family. Also, I could swear you'd be married off in your early teens.' He sighs. 'But then the thought of you and everything about you, especially after you showed up again out of nowhere with that strategic rescue operation of yours to save —'

'Please stop. Why would you keep adding to something which is already overwhelming in magnitude? I don't need more convincing. You've written a book on those. Keep pushing this, and I won't ever feel worthy of you.'

'I'm sorry if I —'

'And about that incident with the salt-seller and those other ruthless boys, as I said before, I was not the person who carried you to that cart or hid you there. *You* were. So if there is any praise or blame —'

'True, but I swear I only did what I did because of you.'

His sentence along with his solemn look comes as a new shock. She can't help staring at him open-mouthed but only for a split second. She looks away quickly and covers her face. For the past few months in her mind, she has, again and again, surfed through and analysed all that he had said about that incident; yet it is only now that she fully comprehends the rationale for his declaration.

'And I wasn't going to disclose that bit about your room until after we got together, and in all honesty I hadn't planned for this. If it hadn't been for your evening prayers and fasting, along with the way you were about to endanger yourself with those valuables, I wouldn't have brought it up. But now that it has, let me suggest something for all it's worth.'

He states that the first thing he did in the house was to set up that room, and that was long before the fire incident and the settlement of the children there. The room has never been used by anyone, and has remained locked ever since, with only one key to it. He asks her to move in with the children and start a new life there, in a much more familiar and homelike environment. She can have easier access to the children she has always loved, work for him as a business partner if she is eager to have a job, and follow her dreams until her divorce comes true, and she has a clearer idea of what she wishes to do next.

Soo, however, has been shaking her head with tears in her eyes.

As his last resort to convince her, he further promises that he and his men will not allow anyone to harm her, and meanwhile he will stay away from her for as long as she wants him to. In cases of absolute necessity they can always communicate through his grandmother or the staff there. 'Knowing you, this won't be your last visit. If you love these little ones the way I know you do, instead of commuting back and forth to that city, just stay with them, be an active part of their lives, make decisions for them, and help me help them. They need you, and so do I. For heaven's sake, except for those three – Parvaneh, Maryam, and Saeed – you mentioned that day we don't even know their names.'

'You do *now*. They each have a name sticker on their upper arm, which is of course a temporary solution. They're going to need a proper name tag, like a wristband or a locket or something.'

'Okay, but still that's not all that —'

'About your generous offer, I want nothing more than what you just pictured, but the timing is terrible for me. I'm in a mess right now and need to deal with my family first. As for the children, they might mean the world to me, but you've not only saved their lives, but by far proven to be the best thing that has ever happened to them. Who can question your judgement or doubt the decisions you make about their future? I trust that you'll always be their guardian angel, even if you don't keep a single one here. I really need to go.'

Joe reluctantly moves out of her way. 'I'll be worried sick unless I escort you back to your hiding place myself.'

‘Just leave it to your men to take care of that, as they have for the past couple of days, and I’m again grateful by the way.’

He watches in despair as she leaves her childhood home.

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Putting off Tahmineh’s plea for the details of Soo’s journey on that day is not an easy task, and neither is getting in touch with her elders. Yet in light of the most recent incidents, Soo first makes the long overdue phone call she has been advised by the Raads to do.

It is Salman who answers the phone, and his swearing her to God not to hang up just as she utters her quiet *salaam* proves the Rustins’ desperation to speak with her.

Soo winces. ‘Okay. I won’t hang up, but ... is everything alright? ... No, tell them I don’t have the face to talk to them directly or come home, but I miss them terribly,’ says Soo, in tears. ‘You’re just saying that, and I appreciate it, but the whole world knows that my *aberu* is gone ... Please just give me their message yourself? ... What do you mean my divorce, and Joe, and all that he has done? ... Even if it is a long story, give me the highlights of what’s happened in my absence.’

Half an hour later, the stunned Soo ends the call, having heard from her brother the detailed version of the Raads’ visit to the Rustins the night before, along with the direct confrontation between Joe and Rasool. She has also conditionally agreed to meet up with her father the following morning at eleven, provided it is held in public and on neutral ground. She is told it relates to her divorce, which she is reassured her father will not object to, and which also requires her own presence.

The impatient Tahmineh can’t believe her ears once she has finally been filled in on how Soo and all the little orphans have been reunited, as well as the much informative phone call. ‘Wow. I couldn’t have possibly been left more flabbergasted. And it isn’t just his heroic rescue of all the babies you’d die for. I knew the guy was not going to sit around and just watch you suffer through this. I

was sure he'd somehow pave the way for you to get your divorce, and also conciliate between you and your family.'

'Who would have even pictured in their mind the Raads and the Rustins together under the same roof in the same house?'

'Yep, let alone discussing Joe Raad's having the hots for Soo Rustin.'

'Hey, stop it.'

'That guy never ceases to ... I mean look at all the clarifications he has made in your defence to mitigate your problems, not to mention his brave and brilliant treatment of Rasool, bringing out his true colours in front of everyone in the best possible way. If it hadn't been for Joe, Rasool would have never confessed to anything.'

'Not in a million years.'

'Then would you stop shivering and think of what this means. You *do* realise what this means, Soo?'

'To some extent, yes, and I'm grateful to God. Still there are many other worries that —'

'What other worries? That your father is lying about his consent to the divorce, or deep down he is unwilling to do so? That he is going to hate you forever for running away from a marriage they now know was a big mistake to begin with? Or that you'll bring shame to your family by becoming an old maid and not having an appropriate suitor who'll measure up to their high standards? What exactly *is* your problem?'

Soo is in deep thought on the floor, holding her head on her knees.

Tahmineh further reminds her that Soo's elders are not stupid. With the way Joe has unmasked Rasool, and also proven his own true character, there is no doubt in their mind which one is the right man for her. Instead of all this baseless anguish and hesitation, she should in fact be optimistic and look forward to seeing her father tomorrow. 'Just one thing! Did they tell you why Joe is keeping the children in your old house of all places?'

Soo shakes her head. 'No. My mind was so swamped with all the other astonishing information that I didn't get a chance to ask.'

## Chapter 14: Soo and Joe

The following morning, Soo reaches Tehran's famous *Meydane Arg*, a busy square within the central part of the city, at 10:50 to find her father already there, sitting on a bench with his black Samsonite briefcase next to him. He looks pensive while reading some lines from his small mantra book he always carries in his pocket. She easily spots a couple of Joe's men around. Keeping Tahmineh's suggestion in mind, Soo tries her best to be optimistic. Yet all her anguish and hesitation returns as soon as Ebrahim notices her walking towards him. He gets up with a familiar twinkle in his eyes, which only he and Soo know is exclusive to her – the daughter he named after the suras of the holy Qur'an, for no other symbolic metaphor could possibly denote her preciousness. But whether she still means the same to him is beyond her knowledge. The twinkle is overshadowed by tears when she reaches him and throws herself at his feet.

'*Baba*, I'm so sorry for your pain,' cries Soo, kissing her father's shoes. 'I will never again go against your will.'

'Get up, *dokhtaram*, my daughter,' says Ebrahim, bending down to bring her up to her feet. 'You're breaking *Baba*'s heart.'

'I swear I never meant to hurt my family. I'll be in hell if you don't forgive me.'

He holds her shoulders and lifts her up to face him, at the same time looking greatly concerned. 'Since when do we greet each other with an apology and in tears? Are you alright, my girl?' He places a few kisses on her forehead before the two hug. 'I have missed you like I never thought could be possible. How can I blame you for resorting to desperate measures when I was the one pushing you that far? It's me who has come here to beg for your forgiveness.'

It takes a good few minutes and a flood of tears for both the father and the daughter to express without any hesitation their heartfelt feelings for one another. Once they are able to control and settle their initial overflow of emotions, they sit on the bench and discuss the most important thing on their hand, namely the divorce.

‘When it came to your relationship with Rasool, I’ve been an ignorant fool.’

‘Please don’t say that.’

‘It’s true. I should have been alarmed by all these red flags that kept popping up, screaming the faults and flaws in this marriage. As its foundation, a happy marriage requires honesty, trustworthiness, and intimacy, none of which yours had. But then he was my nephew and ... unfortunately when you want something badly, there is no limit to how far you rationalise its shortcomings. Still nothing can justify my negligence.’

‘Dad, no one in the world would call you a negligent parent.’

For Ebrahim, Rasool’s keeping the news about the children from her was the last straw. He knew right there and then that her marriage was in trouble. When he asked her directly in his study and she still seemed willing to go ahead with the wedding, he should have stopped everything regardless. He should have known his daughter and realised that they were both hesitant to interrupt everything for the same wrong reason. In their social affairs, defying the odds and the fear of being the odd one out are the two most daunting prospects. People’s opinion and judgment have always determined how they run their lives. It is unfortunate but no one can afford to turn their backs on cultural instructions, rules, and customs. Besides, they got themselves so deeply involved with all the outer terrestrial extravagance that its shaky core was overshadowed. That is how Soo’s marriage became the actualisation of the famous poem:

*Khaneh az paybast viran ast*

*Khajeh dar bande naghshe eivan ast*

*The mansion is terribly decayed from its foundation*

*The master is thinking about the terrace decoration*

Ebrahim brings out of his briefcase Soo’s identification documents, as well as her copy of the marriage certificate. ‘So ... to come to the main point, these belong to you.’

‘Thank you. I was told I couldn’t file for *talagh* without them, or without you.’

‘Well, now you do have your documents, along with your father and his consent. However, you don’t have to do anything.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand.’

‘Consider it all done.’

‘What!?’

To Soo’s astonishment, he relates his recent trip to the Registration Bureau – the building he points to right behind him – to initiate divorce on her behalf, and yet his near failure when he was asked for a medical certificate he couldn’t provide. ‘As you know, the sharia law requires *eddeh*, a three-month waiting period between the couple, before the divorce is finalised, lest any new pregnancies go unnoticed and unaccounted for.’

Soo’s embarrassment makes her blush. Virginity, love, and sex are the least talked-about subjects between girls and their elders, especially their fathers, and yet the entire family’s *aberu* and *namous* revolve around the same undisclosed entities and the girl’s ability to preserve them.

Ebrahim continues in a low voice and a face that looks just as uncomfortable. ‘I didn’t even know how to ask a daughter like you to go through such a thing. But thanks to the Lord, I was saved by a godsent man.’ He explains that his ex-colleague, who knew their family well, waived that requirement on the basis of his trust and prior familiarity with the Rustins the moment he heard how the wedding night had been disrupted.

‘So you mean ...’

‘I mean you are divorced as soon as you and I go into that building and sign the forms.’

‘Are you serious?’ asks Soo, jubilantly. ‘But what about Rasool? Doesn’t he have any part in this?’

‘I notified him yesterday to come and sign the papers, which was the only thing to be done on his part, considering you had the right of divorce. And he did so, this morning before you came.’

Soo kisses her father's hands, thanking him for his considerateness in expediting what to her had become the most harrowing task.

'He also apologised for everything, wished you the best, and hoped we maintain our familial relationship as always.'

'Glad to hear it. That's wonderful news.'

'Whether he truly means it or is taking someone's threats very seriously is open to debate, but anyway ...'

They get up. Ebrahim's reference to Joe is making Soo nervous. He shows her the way to the Registration Bureau.

'Look, my girl! I know you're going to be shy about this, but we also need to have a serious father-daughter talk about someone else, once you finish signing those —'

His sentence is interrupted. Two of Joe's men, both sturdy and muscular, are blocking their way. Ebrahim looks intimidated and goes in front of Soo, holding her behind him.

'Sir, I have to ask you to leave the lady alone. You can't take her with you,' says one of the men.

'Excuse me? This is my daughter. Who are —'

'It's okay, Dad, relax.' Soo pulls her father back gently. 'I'm sure these gentlemen are the engineer's friends. He has asked them to watch over me, in case I face any problems outside.'

'Oh, I see.' Ebrahim thinks while breathing a sigh of relief. 'Well, in that case, I should in fact appreciate your safeguarding my daughter. I will show you our IDs to prove that we are indeed father and daughter. We'll just be in that building for a short time,' says Ebrahim, opening the briefcase on his knee.

'I'm afraid we have strict orders to stop whoever would be trying to take her anywhere regardless.'

'We do hope you comply. We hate to use force against a respectable man in public,' says the other man.

Looking helpless and frustrated, Ebrahim steps away from the men. 'We have to get in touch with him,' he says to Soo. 'Or better yet ...' He faces the men again. 'Could I ask you to please contact your boss and give him a message from me?'

'Sir, with all due respect —'

'If you tell him it is from Ebrahim Rustin, he *will* hear my message. Tell him my daughter and I are here for an important reason. Unless I take her with me to sign some papers, her divorce will not take place. Also, I'd greatly appreciate it if he meets us here as soon as he can.'

Soo looks uncomfortable hearing the last part of her father's message. Except for a short few minutes on the night of the shooting, the three of them have never been together.

Joe's men politely ask the Rustins to wait until they return, which they do shortly. Based on the new instructions, one of them accompanies them inside the building, while the other stays outside.

Khorshidi is not in, but it doesn't take his staff long to bring the file for the Rustins to sign, right where Rasool's signature is visible, and for the registration of the divorce to be finalised. After the concluding step, which is the manual inscription of the divorce in Soo's birth certificate, the father and daughter leave the building in less than half an hour, followed by Soo's bodyguard not far behind.

They walk up to the same area with the benches to wait for Joe, but even before they sit, his roaring bike turns their head. He has a quick chat with his friend before coming their way with the most appalling appearance.

Soo winces, yet covers her face to hide her worries about Joe from her father.

'*Salaam*,' says Joe, covered with visible blood and mud stains.

'*Salaam*. Are you alright?' asks Ebrahim.

'Yes. Forgive me for my appearance. I didn't have time to change.'

'This talk can wait. You seem to be in need of immediate medical attention.'

‘Not to worry. I’m not hurt.’

‘You’ve got blood all over you.’

Soo gives her father a package of tissues, which Ebrahim hands to Joe without delay.

‘Thanks, but it’s not my blood. If you don’t mind waiting here for a few minutes, I’ll be with you shortly.’

‘Of course.’

Joe dashes off. Their eyes follow him as he leaves his bike near his friend, takes a sports bag out of the back of his bike, and disappears inside one of the buildings.

Ebrahim and Soo sit back, reflecting deeply on what they just witnessed, but luckily not for long. In only seven minutes, he comes running, all freshened up and well-presented.

‘I’ll take it from here,’ he says to one of his men near them, sending him away before approaching Ebrahim. ‘My apologies for the way —’

‘You said it wasn’t your blood,’ says Ebrahim. ‘You mean you ...’

Joe smiles. ‘No, I haven’t killed or injured anyone either. Long story.’

‘Do you mind telling us what happened?’

‘There was a stampede situation in one of the suburbs in the outskirts. A cattleman’s stud bull was attacking everyone and causing a chaos, and I had my hands full hunting him down.’

‘So you managed to kill the animal?’

‘No, he was of a rare breed. They needed his unique genes for future generations, and didn’t want him dead. Yet, they couldn’t tame him either.’

‘What caused him to go wild?’

‘Apparently he happened to be a trouble-maker too. One of the neighbouring cow owners, who was fed up with him, attempted to slaughter him, only to see him flee moments after the knife touched his throat.’

‘What!?’

The three exchange glances, while the father and daughter are having a hard time keeping a straight face. Ebrahim bites his lips, while Soo pulls her veil across her face with only her smiling eyes visible.

‘I’m not kidding. He probably didn’t think he should die as yet,’ says Joe with a solemn look. ‘I tied him up and took him to a barn while he was still bleeding. Luckily we found a vet who stitched up his incision. And so that’s how my clothes got stained.’

‘I see.’

‘I only told you this because you wanted to hear it. It’s obvious you didn’t invite me here to joke, nor is this an appropriate time to be hilarious.’

‘True. But to be honest, ever since the wedding I can’t remember even a slightest smile appearing on our faces. So the humour – whether intentional or unintentional – couldn’t have come at a better time.’

‘I’m all ears. And by the way, sorry for my friends and their restrictive instructions.’

‘You don’t need to apologise for assigning bodyguards to my daughter.’

‘It wasn’t that I didn’t trust you with your daughter, Mr Rustin. It was the other involved parties whose reactions to this divorce I wasn’t sure of, and therefore I couldn’t take any risks.

‘That was a wise decision, and I totally understand.’

‘Also it was only *after* my family and I left your house that I found out through my connections where your daughter was staying. Before that I was just as unaware as the rest of you. I’d hate to see any trust issues arising from —’

‘I had no doubt about that.’ Ebrahim shows Joe the bench and they all sit, with Ebrahim in the middle. ‘This is the first chance I’ve had since the wedding to speak to my daughter directly.’ He points out Soo’s lack of knowledge about recent events, and that she has only found out yesterday the full story of the Raads’ visit and its result. ‘I’m glad we came across her bodyguards who led us to you. Right before going in there, I was in fact telling her how vital it is for us to have a serious talk about you. And I can’t be happier to have you here in person.’

Ebrahim very much wants Soo to come back home, but he knows this might not be what she wants right now, and he respects that. 'But, you need to hear what I have to say about the engineer, Mr Raad, today.'

Joe clears his throat. 'You can call me Joe, or even Yousef if you want.'

'Thank you!'

Soo's heart is racing. She swallows nervously with her eyes on the ground. 'Dad, all I was hoping to achieve today was to file for divorce, whereas – thank God and thanks to you – we got the divorce I was after. This is much more than I could have dreamed would happen in one day. We don't have to open up another subject, or do anything else you're not ready or comfortable with.'

Joe looks deeply affected and is taken aback by the new information about the divorce.

'But I *am*,' says Ebrahim. 'And this needs to be done today. Why do you think I asked him to come over? You do know that, religiously speaking, a recommended deed, a *mostahabb*, should never be put off for later, as there is no telling if there will ever be a later time. Besides, postponing this any longer wouldn't be fair to him ... or to you.'

Soo is getting more embarrassed by the minute knowing her father is now aware of her romantic feelings for Joe.

'Sorry to interrupt,' says Joe with a baffled look, 'but about the divorce, isn't there a certain period of *eddeh* until —'

'There is, but I was lucky to bump into an old colleague, who took my word and expedited the process in our case when I explained to him ... the couple's lack of —'

'I see.' He gets the point, and then goes into deep thought, with his eyes running right and left on the brick ground under their feet.

Ebrahim faces Soo again. 'In case you don't know, I've also visited the orphans, the little ones he has rescued. But I'd hate to spoil any surprises, so don't ask me about them if you haven't seen them for yourself.'

‘I have. I got to see them yesterday. And yes, I was told you’d been there earlier.’ Remembering the children fills her eyes with tears.

‘I have never been so touched and moved by any scene in my entire life.’

‘Neither have I, Dad,’ says Soo.

Ebrahim had gone there for a different reason, but suddenly found himself in the middle of a spectacular sight. For a moment he felt like he had left this world and reached those children in the afterlife.

All three share a moment.

‘Dad, you avoided that neighbourhood for a decade. Why a sudden interest in going to that specific house? And why is it now accommodating those children?’ asks Soo.

‘You mean you don’t know?’

She shakes her head. ‘Whoever I asked refused to answer me, and only referred me to my family. But I was so overwhelmed with everything else that I didn’t ask about it over the phone last night.’

‘Once you open his wedding present, which I have actually brought with me but forgot to give you, you’ll get your answers.’ He brings it out of his briefcase and hands it to Soo in its original wrapping with pink and blue stripes. ‘This was the only one of your presents I had no choice but to open in advance, and I hope you don’t mind me doing so without your permission. I too was searching for answers.’

‘The wrapping reminds me of the yarn ...’ She stops her sentence finding no appropriateness in disclosing the romantic side of a *namahram* to her father.

Joe too keeps quiet.

Inside, she first notices a picture with a one-line note on the back of it: *This was left behind, so I thought I’d return it.*

‘Thank God, it’s not lost,’ says Soo, being cautious about her wording in front of her father. It is no other than the life-changing picture of Joe and the children in that fire incident, the one she had shown him in the villa, and forgotten to take back.

She then picks up the other piece, the *ghabaleh*, with the words *title deed* at the top of its first page. She glances through it. What catches her eye is the address of their old house handwritten in blue ink, along with her name as the new owner of the property. She is already soaked in sweat in a matter of seconds. Finding proper words to express her feelings in the presence of her father is a challenge, underplaying her emotions even worse. 'I don't know what to say.' That's all she can mutter.

Ebrahim faces Joe while clearing his throat, to take over the rest. 'I myself also never had the chance to thank you for this.'

'There is no need,' says Joe. 'I had to bring a present and I —'

'You didn't have to, and definitely not a present this pricey.'

'I wanted to, and I thought since I was the reason you sold that house, and no doubt that was one main cause of the old enmity between us, why not buy it back for the family to whom it has utmost sentimental value.'

'That was indeed a very thoughtful intention, worthy on its own. You certainly didn't have to spend so much money to find your way into our hearts. You had already achieved that through so many other nonmonetary routes.'

'I purchased it a long while ago when you still hadn't gotten to know me. It was up for sale about a month before the revolution when property prices were incredibly low.'

'Still, that is one of the largest and best-built homes in that neighbourhood. It must have cost a young man your age a fortune.'

'I got an unbelievable deal.' He states that its previous owner turned out to be a commander in the Shah's SAVAK, who was desperate to liquidate all his assets and escape the country before the overthrow of the monarchy, which he knew was imminent. He didn't have many offers to begin with. The real-estate market was at its worst, and people were evacuating the city. Moreover, once people found out about his post, not many dared or even liked to do any business transactions with him. 'So, I got very lucky. I guess that house was meant to be the Rustins' again, and I hope it stays that way.'

Soo still looks dazed as she puts the title deed and the picture back inside its wrapping paper.

Ebrahim shakes his head in amazement. 'God works in mysterious ways when the impossible is meant to become possible. Had anyone told me last fall this is how life will turn out for us in the following spring, I ...' He continues to shake his head. 'In any case, I can't think of a better present anyone could have given our family. And like my daughter, I find no words to express my gratitude.'

'There really is no need —'

A hefty man approaches Joe with a small leather bag on his shoulder. He apologises for the interruption, hands the bag to Joe, and leaves, after exchanging some coded gestures with Joe.

Ebrahim goes on, 'As I was saying, true, this young man and I started off on the wrong foot, and I misjudged him in the worst possible way, which I hope he forgives me for. But things are different now.'

He won't go into details on that for Soo, as he is sure she knows Joe and his calibre better than anyone else. Still, considering Joe Raad's lifestyle, there remains the likelihood of future imprisonment, injury, lonely nights, long periods of separation, dangerous missions, and so on and so forth, which are all inseparable parts of his life. But everyone knows that becoming a lifelong companion to a saviour is a package deal. 'Regardless of how strong and extraordinary a girl might be, is this an ideal life any father would approve of for his daughter? The answer is no,' he says with a deep sigh, jolting the hearts of the two youngsters sitting beside him.

He gets up, with a hand gesture to them to stay seated, and starts pacing in front of the bench to tell them a true story, a story he says he has never before told anyone, a story Soo knows is no other than a part of his own autobiography.

There was a man who was madly in love with a woman. They had a tough time convincing their families that they were right for each other but finally got engaged to be married. Unfortunately, right before their wedding, she was killed in a car crash. For a while he thought that life had come to an end. But then people insisted that he get a wife in the ordinary arranged way and move on. He would much rather have died, but based on his religious beliefs staying single

would be a sin. Up to this day, although he is grateful to God for his wife and children and the good life he now has, he still can't help thinking what it would have been like if destiny hadn't torn him apart from the woman of his dreams.

He stops in front of Soo, with tearful eyes which seem to have relived the flashback. 'I don't want you to go through what that man went through, not ever.' He swallows a big lump and wipes the perspiration of the heartbreaking memory off his forehead, while staring right into her eyes. 'If you really want Joe, Joe it is then. Who am I to keep you two apart?'

Soo and Joe can't believe what they're hearing while holding back tears.

'Had I had the slightest doubt in his claims about you, after seeing those children and his sentinels, I am convinced what you must truly mean to him, and how far he'll go to protect you and make you happy. All I can do is to pray to God to shield you both against harm in this unconventional journey. You have my blessing. Whenever you two are ready, I'll be more than happy to arrange a meeting between our two families.'

Soo and Joe stand right up but are too moved for words. Her shedding happy tears on her father's shoulder is a clear window to her heart, and enough affirmation as he needs. Once she steps away from her father, it is the men's turn to warmly shake hands which leads to an affectionate embrace. Seeing her two men bury the hatchet is another dream come true for the tormented Soo.

'That's all I had to say, except that your grandmother and mother insisted on coming with me to see you, and since they had missed you terribly, I couldn't say no.'

'Seriously? Where are they?' says Soo, looking around with excitement.

'In the car, in an alley back there. I wanted to talk to you alone first. I also wasn't sure how you'd react to seeing anyone else. We didn't want you to feel pressured.'

'I'd love to see them.'

They walk to the car where Khanom Jaan and Shireen unite with their beloved runaway girl. Ebrahim briefly fills them in on the result of their talks.

After a few minutes of true felicity, Khanom Jaan keeps Soo's face in between the palms of her hands. 'Sweetheart, first of all I want you to know that none of us blamed you for the incident, not even once.'

'That's highly generous and considerate of you.'

'Secondly, I don't want you thinking for a moment that because Rasool was, and still is,' she rolls her eyes with a grimace, 'my grandson, there will ever be any hard feelings between you and me.'

'I won't lie. I had my doubts but not now after seeing you here, Khanom Jaan.'

'God knows he had his chance with you, but he failed badly, letting himself and us down. As God is my witness, I cannot think of any other husband for an angel like you than this true knight standing before us.'

'Agha Ebrahim! Now that *alhamdo lillah* everything is resolved,' says Shireen, sniffing and raising her hands up towards the skies, 'please tell me our Soo is coming home with us. Her sister and brother —'

'Didn't we agree that we're going to let *her* decide for herself?'

'Don't worry, *Maman*. Of course I'm coming home.'

'What about Mr Engineer?' asks Shireen. 'The kids will be ecstatic to —'

'Yes,' Khanom Jaan cuts in, 'and we can have a small family celebration to ourselves.'

'You took the words right out of my mouth,' adds Ebrahim.

A look of sombre perturbation covers Joe's face. 'That's very kind of you and we'll do that sometime soon. But before you leave and this gleeful gathering comes to an end, I actually wanted to suggest something which will seem odd, but it would mean a great deal to me.'

'Speak your thoughts, son,' says Khanom Jaan.

He unzips the bag his friend handed him a while ago, and faces Ebrahim. 'When my friends contacted me and said you wanted me here, I didn't get a chance to stop by at home, so I asked my friend to get this here for me.' He pulls out the pink ring box he had previously got for Soo. 'At first, I was hoping you as

her father would accept this as a token or recognition of our engagement until her *talagh* became final. I didn't want to wait any longer to make sure we have a future together. Little did I know that due to the special circumstances, the divorce is already done and over with, and she is actually free as of today.'

Soo is getting red in the face. The two women look at each other.

'What exactly are you suggesting?' asks Ebrahim.

'It's entirely up to you, but do we need all those traditional formalities, ceremonies, and conventions you just finished no longer than five days ago? Didn't you say that a *mostahabb* should never be delayed as there is no telling when or if there will ever be a later time to do the right thing? Of all those phases, what we really need is the religious marriage, and now that you as her elders are present, why don't we have it done right now in that same building?'

'Oh, for heaven's sake!' mutters Shireen.

'Please don't get me wrong.' Joe explains that they can always have a wedding celebration later on, whenever the Rustins wish, with plenty of photos, wedding gown, and all the ceremonies they want. 'I just don't want us to be apart, not for a moment longer. You know your daughter, and my respect for her religious beliefs and restrictions. We have so much on our hands, especially with the children, none of which can be dealt with, unless we become *mahrums*.'

It's no secret to anyone that their daughter doesn't even look at him or speak to him without the presence of others. Besides, there are many other – mostly legal and official – issues that are pending this marriage, especially since she is the lawful owner of the house. In the eyes of the law whatever he has done in that property has been illegal and subject to prosecution. He had to bribe some of the officials heavily, or quieten the less cooperative ones by other means, in order to buy some time until she became an official part of his life.

Ebrahim ponders while exchanging a look with his family. He then faces Khanom Jaan. 'What do you think, Mother?'

Khanom Jaan, who has been examining Soo's face, leans on the side of the car for support. 'The look on my granddaughter's face is telling me she wants exactly what he wants.'

The self-effacing Soo pulls her veil even closer to her face.

In Khanom Jaan's opinion, Soo looks fed up with all the repetitive customary rituals and conventions of marriage ceremony she has twice before gone through. And God knows the hard time they have had with her objecting to every single one. Besides, nothing about the two youngsters, nor their acquaintance with one another, is ordinary or based on the prescribed laws of their forefathers anyway. '*You're her father, and as they say, both the beard and the scissors are in your hands*, but in all honesty, what this courageous young man is suggesting makes sense to me.'

With his hands interlocked behind him, Ebrahim walks up to Soo who continues to keep her eyes on the ground. 'Do you agree with what your grandmother says?'

Soo takes a moment and searches for a suitable answer, unable to meet his gaze. 'Khanom Jaan always knows best,' she mutters.

Ebrahim turns to his wife but only from a distance, and without much eye contact. 'I know you hardly ever pass any comments when my mother and I are present, but this is extremely important, and I don't want you to feel left out. It wouldn't be fair to you. After all you're her mother.'

'Thank you, *agha*,' says Shireen, almost in tears. 'What do I have to say when I know you two only want what's best for her? I too agree with Khanom Jaan. I only wish her sister and brother were here too.'

Joe continues, 'If you allow me I can immediately arrange for them to be brought here, as well as a photographer to take photos of the event. And I understand how much you've missed her. She can go home with you afterwards, and stay with you for as long as you want.'

Ebrahim gives a thorough scratch to his overgrown stubbles. 'But what about your own family?'

'My grandmother lives close by. I'll get her here in no time. As for the rest, they know my impatience and understand my reasons. As long as we have a wedding celebration one day, I'm sure they won't mind.'

Ebrahim studies Soo's face one last time before announcing his decision. 'Well, in that case, and taking my daughter's silence as her consent, I don't see any problem with your request.'

'Then, *mobarak bashe!*' Khanom Jaan expresses her congratulations in advance, clapping her hands in glee, while Joe's hands push away his hair out of his face, looking relieved.

Everyone appears to be pleased. The women embrace joyously.

Ebrahim walks back to Joe. 'Having said that, I hope you realise that you had only asked for two wishes from me, whereas this makes it your third,' adds Ebrahim with a beam on his face which gives away his playfulness, followed by a friendly pat on Joe's shoulder.

'I guess I owe you big time then, Mr Rustin,' says Joe, grinning broadly.

'And just some fatherly advice to save you from such future hardships. Next time you buy a mansion for your loved one and become the father to her army of children, make sure you marry her first.' Ebrahim has everyone laughing.

They all walk happily towards the Registration Bureau again, to allow Soo to make history with her divorce and marriage both on the same day. Joe sends his men to fetch the other family members, while he brings a photographer from a photo studio nearby.

Soo's siblings and Farah join in looking overwhelmed with shock, taking a good few minutes and a convincing explanation to actually believe what they have been invited to. In only fifteen minutes, Farah has already done more hugging and kissing of the bride-to-be than any grandmother-in-law could do in a life time, even if all the brides in the world were just as irresistible.

As soon as the marriage ceremony takes place by the marriage celebrant, and Joe becomes a *mahram*, Khanom Jaan and Shireen put their lawful religious right into use to congratulate Joe by showering their new son-in-law with utmost affection, hugs, and kisses, and welcome him to the family.

Joe finally has the chance to open the ring box he has kept for months, and puts it on the table in front of Soo. This is the first time the ring is made visible to the Rustins, and as such all the eyes zero in on the stunning piece of jewellery,

which is nowhere near ordinary. It holds in its centre a square-shaped diamond in light-pink colour, surrounded first by small white diamonds, and then at its outer border by sky-blue sapphires all around. There is, however, a noticeable amount of sticky tape wrapped around it.

‘This was the only ring that caught my eye, and unfortunately it also happened to be far too big. So I thought I’d adjust it for now till we tighten it to the desired size later on,’ explains Joe.

‘It is just as exquisite and dazzling as the two of you. She is your wife now. By all means you can place it on her finger,’ says Khanom Jaan.

But it is the bride herself who gets a hold of the ring first and wears it on her left ring finger in a flash, placing the box in her purse, too bashful to let the groom touch her hand in front of her elders and others. ‘Thank you!’ she says, without even looking at Joe, who is fighting a smile at her reaction.

Soo’s family exchange glances, but they know their modest and self-effacing daughter all too well and keep quiet.

‘If I may, I too have something for the angelic bride, which in fact isn’t from me,’ says Farah, bringing out a little red velvet pouch from her purse.

One look at the pouch and Joe closes his eyes. ‘Here we go!’ he whispers.

Farah places it near Soo. ‘I don’t mean to bring drama into a happy occasion, but this is from my daughter, the woman who brought your husband into this world, dear.’

‘God bless her soul,’ say the witnesses, all looking affected.

‘Except for her wedding ring, she had given away all her jewellery to charity as an oblation, in return for a son. It was her dying wish that I hand it to his wife when that day comes. I’ve been keeping this for twenty-three years. I swear I thought I’d die without seeing this day. You don’t have to wear it. It’ll be too big anyway, but please accept it, or *she’ll be shaken in her grave.*’

Joe wipes his forehead, looking uncomfortable, and keeping quiet.

‘Of course,’ says Soo, near tears, as she opens it. It is a beautiful gold ring, simple, yet heavy and durable. ‘I’m humbled and feel indebted to be given

something this special. And I *will* wear it with pride and honour.' Soo places the ring on the same finger next to the first one, but since it won't stay on, she wears it on her right thumb. 'Thank you so much.'

The two hug, fighting back tears.

'She would've been so proud,' says Khanom Jaan. '*Alfateha ma'as salawat.*'

As a customary way of remembering the deceased, everyone recites the *Fatehe*, a famous Qur'anic surah Muslims know by heart, with a *salawat* added at the end.

Ebrahim gets up. 'I'm glad that God the Almighty let me live long enough to see this day, or else I would die a guilty father who never forgave himself for firstly handing his daughter to the wrong suitor, and secondly misjudging a remarkable hero who he is now honoured to have as his son-in-law.'

And so the unanticipated marriage takes place in the simplest yet happiest way they ever dreamed it would be, and this time with no doubts or regrets. The cheerful crowd heads back towards Ebrahim's white Peugeot, all the while chatting and laughing in high spirits. The continuous manifestation of Farah's flood of affection towards Soo is, however, a different story, and seemingly a cause of irritation and concern to Joe.

'Grandma,' he says, tugging at her black veil, careful not to make a scene in front of his new family. 'Any more, and she'll be in need of a dermatologist.'

Soo's side of the family start chuckling. Farah gives him a pretend dirty look before loosening her hold of Soo.

'I don't mind it. You are extra kind and loving.' This time it is Soo who kisses the elder's hands.

'Seeing how delighted your grandmother is, and speaking from a father's perspective, I wish your father were here,' says Ebrahim. 'I don't think any man would want to miss his child's *aghd konoon.*'

'My father's health doesn't allow him to move around much. He hardly goes anywhere, unless I force him or carry him.'

‘I’m sorry to hear that. What exactly is he suffering from, if I may ask?’

‘My birth,’ says Joe with a sombre look. Except for Soo, who only bites her lips, he has everyone grinning.

Given the sudden change of circumstances with her elders, and more importantly with Joe, Soo is facing a new dilemma: what the near future holds for Joe and her. On the one hand, her family accepted Joe’s convincing rationale that they were all fed up with the customary phases of the traditional marriage, and on the other hand, they all agreed to a future wedding reception, the details of which haven’t been brought up yet. Where she will reside now and how the issue can be dealt with in the presence of the elders, without anyone directly questioning her about it, has preoccupied her mind.

After a long and poignant goodbye, promising frequent get-togethers in the near future, Ebrahim and his family offer a ride back home to Farah.

‘I can get a cab or use public transport,’ says Salman, opening the front passenger side’s door to the senior lady politely.

‘No, thank you, son!’ says Farah. ‘I can use a bit of walking. Besides, I need to stop by at our local mosque. Now that a great wish of mine has been fulfilled, it’s time I started paying back my votive without any delay.’

Ebrahim notices Soo’s confusion and nervousness near the car. He excuses himself to have a word with his mother and wife. Once they have their short private chat behind the car, he walks over to Soo. ‘My dear, you know that you’re always welcome in your father’s home, and there is no problem with you squeezing yourself in as a fourth passenger in the back as always, but unless there is a specific reason for you to come home with us right now, I think you should stay with your husband wherever he might take you from here. I’ll arrange for your personal items to be sent to you shortly,’ says Ebrahim, kissing Soo on the forehead.

‘I’ve got plenty of new stuff for her to use, but as I said, I don’t mind if she goes home with you, and I never do *ta’arof*,’ says Joe.

‘We know, and that’s very thoughtful of you, but with or without a future wedding reception, it wouldn’t be right separating the two of you. We’ve decided that her home is where *you* are now,’ says Khanom Jaan.

‘My lady is right, Master Joe, *agha*. We wouldn’t feel comfortable taking your wife away from you,’ says Shireen, opening the car door for her mother-in-law. But Khanom Jaan first comes forward repeating some mantras, and places some cash notes on her small Qur’an, to later be given away to the poor as *sadagheh* – a special type of alms believed to keep calamities away. She then spins the holy book on the newlyweds’ head, before getting in the car.

‘Mr Rustin, before you leave,’ says Joe, ‘I want to say how grateful I am to all of you for the way you handled everything today. I hope this occasion means that above all you and I can be friends.’

‘We *have* been friends for a while. You are now much much more, or I wouldn’t be handing you my most priceless possession.’

Ebrahim raises Soo’s left hand. ‘I saw what you did with the ring he gave you. You can shy away all you want, but I’m not leaving until I see the two of you hand in hand. I have to make sure this marriage is everything the other one wasn’t.’

He brings her next to Joe and offers her hand to him. Joe first checks Soo’s reaction, but as he sees no hesitation from her and instead notices the palm of her hand opening towards him, he takes her hand in his, while the three share a heartfelt moment. Joe’s other hand joins in, as if to make sure there is no letting go ever.

‘I suppose my job is done here.’ Ebrahim wishes them the best of everything and all under God’s constant protection before driving off, taking his family with him, and leaving behind his heart and soul.

As the couple’s eyes watch Ebrahim’s car disappear down the road, and Farah too crosses the street out of sight into the alleys, Joe turns to Soo who is using her free hand to wipe away her tears. He now takes both her hands in his and places a gentle kiss on them. ‘*Khanome Raad*, Mrs Raad.’ That’s all he says to her at first and just watches her blush, chuckle, and look at him for a split

second, before looking down again. 'Here's something I never thought I'd say or hear, and neither did anyone who knew me.'

Soo is all red in the face, unable to look at him. 'No one has known you well enough,' she says quietly.

He pretends not to have heard her. 'Excuse me, if you still require another party present during our private chats just say so. I can always drag a pedestrian or someone over here, or even hire a third wheel to be with us for the rest of our lives.'

She fights a smile. 'I'm just too moved to speak. What do you say and how do you thank someone who keeps making the impossible possible?' There is again a quick look at his eyes before she lowers her gaze.

'I can really use a big, overdue hug, for starters, but don't panic. Given we're in public it can wait.' He starts a slow run. 'Come with me,' he says, taking her towards his parked motorbike.

'Where're we going?'

'Where else, but the eyelash trimmer's?'

'Eyelash *what!*'?

They reach his bike. His men are still around and notice the couple return holding hands. He puts their new marriage documents in a chest box near the back wheel of the bike with only one hand, while his other one still has a firm grip on Soo's.

Soo yanks his sleeve. 'There is no such place as —'

'I've decide, now that you've got no religious restrictions to avoid looking at me, it's the weight of your lashes that still prevent you from lifting your eyelids above the ground. Once those things are cut off to normal size, you will look me straight in the eyes whenever I'm with you,' he clarifies.

Soo's already smiling, and tries to break her record by keeping her eye contact with him for much longer than before.

'Stay right here till I return, and think twice before disabling my bike. We *are* going there even if I have to carry you on my back. I'm sure your father

wouldn't move houses for that anymore,' he continues to joke as he reluctantly lets go of her and goes off to his men, allowing the blood flow to reach her fingers again. After a warm handshake, he quickly dismisses his mates and rushes back to Soo.

'You've got an amazing team, the best crew ever. You couldn't have asked for better warriors. The same is true about your motorcycles which are just out of this world,' says Soo, giving an admiring look at the bike while running her fingers across it.

He smiles as he starts wiping the mud stains off the seat of his bike with some tissues. 'I can say the same thing about your family ... all of them. And we got very lucky as well. Though it must have been very hard for your father – and not just living through that experience but also sharing that personal story with us – if he himself hadn't been in love, he could have made things much more difficult for us.'

'Now that you've already figured it out, yes, his Leily is still his one and only soulmate with whom he holds a poignant spiritual connection. She even came into his dream the night before that wedding to warn him about an imminent danger. That's how close they continue to be.'

'Wow,' mutters Joe, looking affected. 'I really feel sorry for him. But then if he hadn't married your mother, there wouldn't be a Sooreh in his life, nor in mine. And I don't think either of us would be happy with such destiny. It's obvious Soo means the world to both of us.'

This is the first time he has pronounced her first name in her presence. The special touch sent across with it makes her blush again.

She covers her face with her hands.

'And she shies away ... *again*.' Joe rolls his eyes. 'Am I still not supposed to even say your first name or express how I feel about you?' He takes her hands in his, and away from her face. 'Okay, fine. If you feel uncomfortable, I won't. Listen to me. Since being demure and bashful is a significant part of you, I need to make one thing clear. Even though I can't be happier that, thank God, our biggest hurdle, which was your elders, is miraculously overcome, I don't want you to misinterpret my impatience and eagerness about this marriage. I swear I

won't be rushing you or pressuring you into anything you're not ready for, not ever.'

'I'm grateful, but I don't need any assurance on that. I should be the one assuring *you* that in spite of my pathetic shyness and lack of experience in many things, I will get used to this new relationship and become a real wife to you much sooner than you anticipate.'

'Fine, I leave you in charge of the pace. Also, I totally understand how you must still feel about this whole *you-and-me* thing. By choosing Joe, you've chosen a rough journey which can be just as scary as it will be adventurous and exciting. But I will always protect you, and do my best to make you happy. Still, whenever it gets too much, feel free to take a break, spend time with your family and friends, or do whatever else you like for as long as you like. The last thing I want is for you to feel pressured or restricted.'

'I don't doubt that, not for a minute. But I never feel happier or safer than when I am with you. The things you do for others – and *to* others – are unbelievably wonderful. My biggest aspiration is to assist you if I can and have a part in all that. And about this *you-and-me* thing, I wouldn't change it for the world,' she says, this time holding his stare for much longer than he expected.

'Okay. Now that going to the eyelash trimer's is off the agenda, and before we go on a proper honeymoon, where would you like me to take you today?' asks Joe, playfully. 'There's my father's home where my family won't believe their eyes to see us together as a married couple. There is my grandma's house, where she will be all over you again. You have no idea what a pain she has been to me ever since the day she saw you at that doomed wedding.'

Soo smiles at his non-stop humour, a smile which she doesn't dare hide from him anymore.

'Or I can take you to your earthly heaven, where you can spoil your beloved little ones all you want. There is no secret they are your world, and I know you're dying to be with them.'

'They wouldn't even exist, if I didn't have you, and they've been spoiled enough,' she adds with all the admiration a voice and a look are able to denote.

‘There is also my place,’ he continues, only this time cutting his sentence short, with a heart-stopping solemn stare, studying her face.

She takes a moment to reply, blushing and yet holding his stare. ‘How about we pretend we don’t know where we want to be, and I leave it to you to surprise me?’

Joe bursts into silent laughter, which in turn brings a wide smile to Soo’s face. He gets on his bike, and knowing her, he moves forward to make enough room for her at the back, even on an unusually oversized bike such as his.

‘Very well, but in case you’re planning on spending the rest of your life in my arms, I must warn you that I’m a busy father of one hundred and four small children, and a much needed man in the world.’

‘I promise to be considerate of your children and all others in the world,’ says Soo, getting on board, and tucking in the hems and corners of her veil.

He gives her a few seconds before examining her way of sitting, and then shooting her a disapproving glare.

‘What?’ asks Soo. ‘I’ve gathered my *chador* nicely. If you’re worried that it will be blown behind us like an untimely parachute, and reduce the speed of your rocket bike —’

‘That’s not it,’ says Joe, fighting a smile. ‘I lost my helmet earlier today in the battle with the bull, so I can’t make you wear one, but as a —’

‘But as a helmet replacement method, I should have wrapped my entire veil around my head?’

He is beaming broadly. ‘I meant to say as a motorbike rider yourself you should know the other riding rules and safety tips for the passenger.’

He is taken aback by her instant compliance. Not only does she move closer to him, and gently wraps her arms around his waist, but she also gradually rests her head on his shoulder. His surprised eyes follow her hands which clasp together right under his ribcage.

He adjusts the bike mirror, watching her reflection as she closes her eyes. He puts his hands on hers and moves them up to his chest, meanwhile noticing

how loose both her rings are for her, even with all the taping he has done on the first one. A good few minutes go by in silence as if time has stopped to let them be as they are, and have this moment for as long as they want it to last, doing nothing but him caressing her hands, and her feeling the rise and fall of his chest, along with the warmth of his touch. Never before have they looked so at peace.

‘Is it me in a new world, or are we not moving?’ she asks quietly.

‘I still can’t believe you are where you are. That’s why.’ He plants a series of kisses on her fingers and looks back. ‘Do you really intend to wear this second ring?’

She nods. ‘Unless you don’t want me to. You still don’t know its symbolic value. Regardless of how we both feel about male-chauvinism, and whether you agree with her incentive and decision to have you, the end result truly is someone to die for.’

He reflects while running his fingers on hers and the rings.

She continues, ‘And the one you’ve given me is beyond words, by the way. Pink has always been my favourite colour, and the blue sapphires match the colour of your eyes.’

‘Any symbolism there, I should know of?’

She chuckles. ‘What else other than the safety and security those little angels and I have when we are surrounded by you?’

After giving a few more kisses to her hands, his big blue eyes travel all over her face, zooming in on her deep-pink dry lips. ‘Listen, are you still fasting?’

‘Yes, but I don’t need to anymore. God the Almighty has granted me all that I’ve ever wished for.’

‘Great. Then how about we drop your rings off at the jeweller’s, and while they are being adjusted, grab something to eat first? I’d hate to see you faint in my arms.’

‘Mm-hmm.’ Soo nods, but they are still where they were and not moving. His unexpected chuckle makes her lift her head to face him. ‘What?’ asks Soo, staring at his magnetic eyes as they meet hers.

Enjoying the spectacular sight only inches away from his face, he takes his time to reply. 'Just catching some mental glimpses of your future with me, and how much more you'll be paying for being in the wrong place at the wrong time and saving my life.'

'I'll take my chances, and I wouldn't change a thing about what I did ten years ago. But for the last time, I did *not* save —'

'Here we go again! I thought we ... Yeah, fine, whatever you say, my crazy stubborn angel.'

And they take off.

THE END

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