

# *Malak Roya Hamadani*

## Looking for Shahbazi

THE PHONE WAS RINGING. Leila heard it as she climbed the stairs to the apartment. She guessed it was her father, phoning to tell her what time he would be home for dinner, and he would be annoyed if she missed his call. One eye closed against a drop of sweat, a grocery bag balanced on her left knee, she searched inside her pocket for the familiar ridges of the apartment key. The answering machine picked up, and the tired message played.

In a moment she expected to hear her father shouting her name. She had an urge to drop the bags. As usual there was the long, toneless beep, but instead of her father's voice she heard an unfamiliar man speaking with a heavy Iranian accent, short *i*'s pronounced as long *e*'s, *th*'s turned to *d*'s. Leila didn't try to listen, but instead concentrated on the tricky lock. Finally she pushed the door open. The shopping bag slid off her knee and onto the floor, along with the egg carton that had been perched on top. A stream of yellow yolk slowly seeped into the carpeting.

Leila closed her eyes. Why, her father would ask, didn't she put the bags down first and then try to open the door? She had no answer for him. Lately she had been losing focus, floating through her days. Today while lecturing about the Calvin cycle, she had paused to look down at the rows of vacant, young faces, and sensed that every mind in the room rode a separate track. She had almost tried to wake them, but then the effort seemed too great, and all she could do was fall back into the rhythms of her memorized speech.

Inside the red light flashed on the answering machine. Leila propped the bags against the floor and pushed the button. In halting English an older man spoke, asking for her father, Bahram Shahbazi. "I am looking for Shahbazi, professor at Pahlavi," said the man, "it is very important, please, he should call

me.” He gave a number and then spoke some words in Farsi Leila could not understand. She played it again, but the words ran together, she couldn’t split them apart. According to her father, she had been fluent as a toddler, but now she knew for certain only the basics—how to say hello, goodbye, cheap, expensive, may your father burn in hell—and so she saved the message and went into the kitchen for paper towels.

It was a strange call. The man seemed to know her father. He had called him by his true last name, Shahbazi, although in the phone book they were listed under his second last name, Mossadeghzadeh, whose inevitably incorrect pronunciation red-flagged every telemarketer. And yet her father had seemingly avoided all contact with other Iranians since the two of them had immigrated to the U.S. Leila had been born shortly before the revolution; her mother died in a car accident shortly after. In 1978, when other Iranian professionals were settling in places like Los Angeles and Washington D.C., her father had chosen the rural Pennsylvania town of Center, where there was a small Catholic college with an opening in Mathematics, but no other Iranians for miles. Which meant that Leila had grown up explaining herself, endlessly correcting the pronunciations and intentions of well-meaning social studies teachers—“It’s Ee-rah-n, not I-ran, and no, I wouldn’t like to lead the discussion on India.” And lately the explaining had turned to defending, and the correcting to keeping silent.

Leila wound the paper towels off the roll and onto her arm. She had to clean up the eggs, put away the groceries, do the laundry and make the *tah chin* all before her father came home. Then she had the weekend to herself, with only ninety tests on photosynthesis to correct, a lab practical to write, and eight parent-teacher conferences on Monday to prepare for. Although she could name for certain which three wouldn’t show. It was something of a random skill; the older, more experienced teachers commented on it: Leila could always read in the faces of her students which ones had the parents who had simply given up.

The legs of the dancing Elvis clock swayed back and forth, while the arms approached a quarter to six. Mehdi Akhavan replaced the phone receiver on the hook. Sitting back in his chair in the half-light of late afternoon, he noted the time. The clock he had ceased noticing; it was a gift from his son. He closed his eyes, and tried to breathe past the bands that seemed to encircle his chest and abdomen. He inhaled carefully, imagining himself sipping a spoonful of hot soup, and then exhaled carefully as though blowing on the next. He knew, from years of practicing medicine as well as past experience, that this was not a treatable pain.

Mehdi's wife had died two years earlier, and his son Pedi, who called himself Peter now, worried for him. For months he had been asking his father to sell the house in Philadelphia and move to Seattle to live in a nearby complex with other seniors. But Mehdi had unfinished business. In his hand he held a slip of paper with a printed phone number and a name: Bahram Shahbazi. He had dialed the number very carefully, looking through reading glasses at the tiny key pad of the phone and hoping the man had not moved or died, or worse, gone back to Iran. To search for someone in Iran nowadays would be difficult. He had no close relatives, no friends to contact there any longer. Everyone he knew had either left or died.

Mehdi looked again at the clock on the wall. He would call again in three hours. If he was unsuccessful, he would try again the next morning at ten-thirty. He would leave a message, then try again at one o'clock, six o'clock, and nine o'clock. He would not stop until he had spoken to Shahbazi. If Shahbazi refused to listen, he would write. If Shahbazi returned the letters, he would go there himself, as much as he hated to travel. It did not matter. He would do what must be done for Siamek.



Leila had just begun to fix the salad when she heard her father at the door. She paused, the vegetable peeler in hand, wondering if he would notice the egg traces on the carpet. She had gotten distracted and tried the cleaner too late; the stain had already set

by the time she remembered. It was one more lapse in concentration, one more tiny failure to add to the list.

“Hi, Dad,” she called out. “How was your class?”

“Yes, hi, fine, thank you,” he answered, rushing past her. The belt of his raincoat dragged behind him as he headed for the bathroom. She waited until she heard the water running, and then called to him through the door.

“Do you think maybe we need a new lock?”

“Why? Did you break it?”

“I just had a little trouble again with it earlier,” she said quickly. She poured slices of cucumber over the lettuce and tomato. “Maybe it’s me. I’m turning it wrong.”

“I find that spray,” her father said. “You know? That spray for the lock. After I go through my paper.” He made a sound of annoyance. “I have so many paper tonight.”

Leila smiled, thinking of her ninety tests. But she knew what he would say. It was no comparison. She placed the salad on the table, finding room for it next to the pickles and *mast a spinach* near her father’s setting, so that all the dishes formed a constellation around his plate.

“Someone called for you. Someone Iranian, I think he might know you.”

The bathroom door opened and her father emerged. “Probably selling something,” he said, stopping in front of the oven window. “*Tah chin*, eh? You remember the *bademjan*?”

“Yes, I remembered the *bademjan*,” said Leila. She had forgotten the eggplant once since she had started making *tah chin* on her own at the age of thirteen, and had to accept as her punishment that she would have to listen to his reminders for as long as they both lived. She slipped a pair of mitts over her hands and opened the oven door, stepping quickly away from the blast of hot air that enveloped her face. Her father opened the freezer, grabbed ice cubes and dropped them into his glass.

“There is a disgusting stain, you know, *Leila-jan*.” The ice cubes tinkled. “On the carpet near the door, it is yellow—”

“I don’t know how it got there, Dad, it was like that when I got home.”

The casserole dish was hot and unwieldy. She quickly deposited it on the counter. As she pulled back the tin foil she felt her father watching over her shoulder, checking to see that the eggplant slices were indeed sitting on top of the rice. It irritated her so much, and yet she found herself doing it time and time again to her students. Did you wash and dry all the scalpels, are you sure, are you sure? You're sure you're sure? Let me just make sure.

"Looks good," he said, nodding, arms folded. Leila looked at him and wondered what he had been like when he was young, before her mother died, before he lost everything. Had he always been this way? Maybe her mother had known the secret to calming him.

The phone rang. Her father sat down next to it, completely ignoring the ringing as he sipped his drink and read his newspaper. With a sigh she pulled off her oven mitts and walked across the kitchen, bunching her fists. I'm becoming a wife, Leila thought, picking up the phone. A daughter-wife.



Mehdi listened for a man's voice on the line, for the voice of Bahram Shahbazi, but instead he heard a bored young American woman say hello. He almost hung up, thinking he must have misdialed, but he couldn't bear to be rude.

"Ah, *salam aleikum*," he said automatically, then tried quickly to switch to English. It never came easily. As a pathologist he had never had to develop a repertoire far beyond general niceties and technical language; he rued it now. "Hello, yes, Madame. Is this the home of Bahram Shahbazi, who taught at Pahlavi, is she home?"

There was a tiny pause before the girl answered. "Yes, he's here," she said, her emphasis on the word *he*. Mehdi felt a twinge of embarrassment, but was comforted by the fact that she had at least understood him, made sense of his accent without asking him to endlessly repeat himself. "Who shall I say is calling?"

"This is Doctor Mehdi Akhavan," he said, and paused to look out his window at the children playing in the street below. He watched the tops of their heads bobbing as they ran after a red

ball. "I am calling with regard to Siamek," he said carefully.

"Okay, hang on just a minute."

"*Bale, bale. Merci, khanum.*" This girl had no reaction at all to the name, thought Mehdi; could Siamek have meant so little to her? Or was she a new wife, who had never even heard of the boy? He heard the click of the hold button, then the hum of the line.

Outside the children stopped to let a car pass, then resumed their game. Mehdi turned away from the window. He heard their high, sharp shouts, reminding him of his own grandchildren, and then the sound of the ball banging against the trash cans. He hoped they would not knock them over again. He didn't have the energy to clear up the mess, and there was no one to help him anymore.

"Hello?" said a man almost roughly. "What do you want?"

"Bahram Shahbazi?" said Mehdi. "*Salam.*" From the alley he heard a crash, and again he was struck by the awfulness of the task he was performing. Siamek, Siamek, he thought as he cleared his throat, how should I begin?



Leila had always known in a vague way that her father hid many things from her. Problems with getting tenure, problems with his heart, problems with family left back in Iran. When she was younger she had asked him questions, hoping to help, but he'd either furiously deny anything was the matter or find ways to attack her until she hurt him back. All it took was the mention of her mother. After his heart attack, they had learned to speak of other things: the loud neighbors, the grocery shopping, the paint peeling in the bathroom. This continued after his triple bypass surgery five months earlier, which had prompted her to move back in. Now he commented only a little about how she was wasting her time teaching high school students, and she, for her part, mostly bit her tongue when he did.

And what could she say? For two years she had worked toward a doctorate in plant biology, toward becoming the second

Dr. Shahbazi. She found herself at conferences, giving papers, talking about her work knowledgeably, if not enthusiastically. Hers wasn't the most exciting project, but she felt she was doing it fairly well, and that gave her a certain satisfaction.

Then one morning she went into the greenhouse to find that over half of her research plants had been eaten, nothing left but a bunch of cropped stems. Two years of work nibbled away overnight. It was as though everything that had been pulling her along for so many years had suddenly reared up and stopped short, and there was nothing left inside her that wanted to keep going.

Leila looked toward the closed door of the study, where her father had gone to take his phone call from the Iranian. Was he a cousin, she wondered, as she unloaded the dishwasher. Someone had once called claiming to be a cousin, but it turned out he had the wrong Shahbazi. She plucked glasses from the plastic tray and examined them one by one. There were streaks and bits of hardened food on two of them; she sighed and put them in the sink to hand wash later. She realized she could hear her father yelling. It didn't alarm her at first because lately he had started to go a little deaf. He was almost seventy, but of course refused to try a hearing aid.

Then she heard a small crash. It was probably a book falling off the shelf, a pile of papers slipping off the desk, Leila thought, but she ran down the hall anyway. She always carried in the back of her mind a picture of her father lying amidst a host of wires and lines, eyes open and tearing, unable to speak because they had intubated his lungs.

"Dad, are you okay?" she said as she opened the door.

He was sitting at his oaken desk, now empty because all the papers that had once rested on it were now strewn about his feet in a white flurry. He looked up at her, his brow furrowed.

"I'm fine!" he shouted.

Even the shelves had been emptied, the journals pulled down. "What happened?"

He shrugged, looked at the mess, then briefly raised his hands. "I am sorting my paper!"

"All of them?" she asked. "Now?"

He pulled the tiny trashcan out from under the desk and began stuffing it with junk mail. "You know, one day I am dead, lovey," he began, shaking his head, "that is the way of life. What will you do? You do not know what to save. There are important documents, paper from Iran, you cannot read them. You will throw it all away."

"I'm not going to throw away all your papers," she said quietly.

"Of course you do!" he shouted, dropping a clump of junk mail on the floor. The shiny envelopes landed around his feet. "You cannot keep them, you cannot keep everything. You cannot even keep the place, not with your salary."

Leila leaned against the doorframe and took a moment to close her eyes. She worked to keep the edge out of her voice. "I'm going to flip the *tah chin*. Will you help me?"

He waved her off. "Are you so hungry? You cannot wait?"

"Dad, it's almost ten."

He shrugged. "All right, go, go, I'm coming."

She was just about to leave when she saw the cordless phone lying on the carpet beside the door. She bent down to get it and saw a small mark on the wall that hadn't been there before. She picked the phone up, and looked at her father across the room. "Did you throw this?" she asked.

He looked at her steadily, his eyes slightly magnified by his glasses. "It fell," he announced, and returned to his papers. Leila waited for a moment, watching him closely, then left with the phone in her hand. She waited until she was in the kitchen to check the caller ID record.



Mehdi stood and walked toward the stove. His hands shaking slightly, he put a pot of water on to boil, took a tea bag from the box, and dropped it into his chipped, white mug. It was dirty, crumbs clinging to the lip, but he did not care.

He sat down at his kitchen table and folded his arms to wait. He looked at the clock. He glanced at the newspaper. He turned on the television. He watched a commercial. He turned it off

again and slammed the remote against the table.

It was terrible, he thought, watching how the blue flame of the gas burner curled up around the curved sides of the teapot. It was terrible that a man should be so angry and so unforgiving for so many years. He had tried to tell Shahbazi this, he had tried to tell him the truth as one father to another, but the man would not listen.

Mehdi felt a tinge of pain in his chest. Across the table was the empty place where Siamek had often sat and shared a meal of steaks and rice with him. He preferred his own well done without a drop of blood left, but Siamek had always liked the middle very rare. It had bothered Mehdi at first, to see the blood issuing from the meat in streaks and mixing with the rice, turning it a slightly nauseating shade of pink. But he had been grateful otherwise for Siamek's presence, his great bulk, his sheepish smile below a crown of thinning hair, and even his terrific appetite. He was helpful, considerate, spoke Farsi in a quiet voice he rarely used and never raised, and in general was more like Mehdi than his own son.

In the last few days Mehdi had learned much of Siamek's past from old papers and photographs, but what had surprised him most was to learn that his friend had once attended MIT. But then Mehdi remembered how they had first met. He had wandered into a chess club in Germantown. Siamek was working there, drinking tea and waiting for strangers to pay him for a game. He had bowed his head and humbly taken the bill from Mehdi's hand, and then proceeded to effortlessly beat him, containing all his various stratagems and trapping his players one by one. And all the time he had smiled at him almost indulgently, as one would at a favored child.

The kettle began to whistle. Mehdi stood up, placing his palms flat on the table and leaning heavily. He had meant for Shahbazi to come. He wanted to explain what had happened, why it had been necessary for Mehdi to act quickly and with an authority he did not officially possess. He poured the steaming water over the tea bag, watched how the liquid instantly clouded brown, turned dark. Someone had to make the necessary arrangements, he

thought, pressing his spoon against the tea bag. Someone had to claim him, and he, Mehdi, had been the only one willing to do so.

In the other room, the phone began to ring. Mehdi sipped his tea too quickly, and felt his mouth burn. He put down his cup and went to get the phone.

“Hello,” he said. There was a pause.

“Hello?” said a young woman. “I’m sorry to bother you, but I think you just called my father?” Everything in her voice, thought Mehdi, sounded like a question.



Although he was a professor, Leila’s father lacked the patience to teach her much, so she had learned how to make *tah chin* from a cookbook. First she fried the boneless, skinless pieces of chicken breast in turmeric and onions, then marinated them in saffron-infused yogurt overnight. The next day she mixed the yogurt and chicken mixture with half-cooked rice. Then she poured everything into a deep transparent casserole dish, placed pieces of fried eggplant on top, and baked it in the oven until it developed its signature golden brown crust. The final challenge was serving it. To be properly enjoyed, the cooled *tah chin* had to be inverted, flipped like a pineapple upside down cake, except that it was far, far heavier. Leila’s method was her mother’s, one of the few things her father had passed on. She placed a large serving platter upside down over the casserole dish and then hoisted the whole assembly onto the top of her head, the platter and the upside down oven dish forming the likeness of a hat. It was stable for as long as her neck and arms could support the weight, but usually she needed help to bring it down to the table.

The *tah chin* was still a little hot, she realized as she prepared to lift it, but she was tired of waiting. It was appropriate, thought Leila, her mittened hands gripping the edges of the casserole dish and platter, that a culture so repressive to women should develop a cuisine not only laborious and time-consuming, but occasionally dangerous as well. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

She did not want to think of the unappetizing pile of work

lying on her bed, or her father barricaded by paper in his study, or her phone call to the Iranian man in Philadelphia, and his indignant shock at how little she knew. *Khanum*, he had said to her, his voice shaking, he told you nothing?

Nothing at all, thought Leila. She planted her feet. One strong pull of her arms and back and it was up, the dish and the platter swinging up and over, hovering for an instant before landing on her head platter side down. Leila felt the pressure and the latent heat of the *tah chin* pass through the ceramic into the top of her skull. But suddenly she was dizzy; she blinked to clear her vision and put one hand on the table for balance. Then the *tah chin* began to tilt to one side, slipping because she was slipping, and when she lifted her hand to right it, it lurched and fell backwards off her head to crash against the floor.

Leila closed her eyes. A door opened. She heard the shuffle of her father's slippers on the hallway carpet. She looked down and saw a steaming corner of rice burning the top of her foot, and tiny yellow grains dotting her toenails. She was surrounded by the smell.

"Ehhh," said her father, "what is this?"

Leila turned and saw him standing in the doorway, eyes wide and mouth open as he surveyed the cracked dishes, the spoiled food. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

"Leila-*jan*, why did you do this?" he said, astonished.

She meant to apologize, the words were all but formed. Yet she heard herself answer sharply, "Why do you always assume I make mistakes on purpose?"

She stared into her father's startled eyes. He leaned against the doorframe and looked down at the floor; his mouth, slack a moment earlier, tightened into a line as he inspected the thousands of moist, yellow grains of rice sprayed all over the kitchen. He looked at her again. "How did this happen? Did you fall?"

"Look, I'm sorry," she said, and then immediately regretted it. "I had a really long day at work." She headed for a chair.

He shrugged. "Well, what do you expect? That is how it is, lovey, that is life." He began picking his way carefully through the rice strewn floor.

Leila put her head down on the kitchen table, and felt the softness of the well-worn tablecloth beneath her cheek. It was something brought from Iran. So close to her eyes, the pattern dyed into the cotton appeared fuzzy, indistinct.

“This is really too bad, Leila-*jan*,” said her father sadly, shaking his head. He picked up a piece of the cracked platter with dish rags to protect his hands. On it was a piece of *tah chin* that had not touched the ground. He carefully carried it to the counter. She watched him take two plates from the cabinet and began transferring the food onto them with a fork.

“Well, what can you do?” he said finally, shrugging at the mess. He put one plate before her and sat down to his own. Leila rested her chin on crossed arms and watched him eat. He was a fast eater; he leaned over his food, hand and mouth constantly in motion.

“How is it?” she asked.

“Good,” he said. “Where is the *mast*?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, thinking of the vanilla yogurt she had accidentally bought instead of plain, “there isn’t any left.”

He shrugged again and wiped his head with his napkin. He often perspired while he ate. She watched a trickle of sweat start somewhere at the top of his almost hairless head, dribble down over his forehead, dodge his eyebrow, and trace his nose, before finally dropping with a splatter into his plate.

“I called that man in Philadelphia,” she said, her stomach twisting. “I know about Siamek, I know I had a brother.”

He slowly put down his fork. “Well, you don’t know anything, Leila-*jan*,” he said. She watched him wipe his mouth, watched his face harden. “He lived like a *geddah*, Leila-*jan*, he never studied. The university, they kick him out.” His voice began to rise, and she could see he was upset, despite all his shrugging. “I talk to him, I ask him what is wrong, and what does he say? He doesn’t want to go to school, he wants to do nothing. So I give him money, tell him to go do nothing, and that’s the end of it.” He pushed a chunk of rice onto his fork with his spoon. He ate it quickly and pointed the fork at her. “I gave him money every month, Leila-*jan*, for doing nothing.”

He returned to the food, and for a few moments she just watched. His jaw moved rapidly, his fork swept more and more food into his mouth.

“I’m a failure,” she said. It hurt to say it, but it was also strangely satisfying, putting into words what she knew he thought of her. “Why don’t you kick me out?”

He shook his head. “No, Leila-*jan*. You have a job, you have a degree,” he said quickly, and reached for another napkin. “And you will get married.”

Leila looked down at her cuticles stained yellow with turmeric and the scraped knuckles of her right hand. “Why didn’t you ever tell me about him?”

He struck his plate with his fork. “Why?” he almost shouted. “I am telling you why. Don’t you listen?”

Leila stood up and went to the kitchen sink, purposefully crushing rice beneath her feet. It stuck to her soles, hot and moist, and bits of chicken and eggplant lodged between her toes. She grabbed the dustpan and brush from beneath the sink and set to work. On her knees, rice sticking to her skin, she began to sweep the floor clean in long, furious strokes.

“Leila? Leila-*jan*?” She wouldn’t look at him as she picked up large sections of the cracked glass dish and threw them into the tall kitchen trash can a few feet away. It tottered, but did not fall. “Leila, are you upset?”

“No,” she said, “of course not.”

“He was living like a *geddah*, Leila.” He held out his hands to her, as though he were reasoning with a mental patient, she thought. “Why should I tell you you have a *geddah* for a brother?”

“Please don’t feel you have to explain,” she said, emptying the contents of the pan and immediately dropping to her hands and knees again.

“Obviously you were right to disown your only son,” she said. She strained to reach the rice that had fallen between the stove and the counter. The space was just a centimeter or two wider than her arm, but she could fit up to the shoulder. “And you were right never to tell me, his only sister, that he existed. You know best of course. It’s not like you’ve ever made a mistake.”

“Ehhh, Leila, that’s too much,” he said, and his voice turned sour. “You want to be that way, go ahead. I’m going to sleep.”

She popped up on her knees. All she could see was his retreating back. “It never occurred to you, did it,” she called after him, “that I might like to ask him about my mother?”

She saw him pause. Beneath her knee she felt a slice of eggplant, warm and oily, but she didn’t move. He leaned to the side for a moment, and she thought he was about to turn around. He put his hand against the wall, pushed his right foot a little deeper into his slipper, and continued down the hall.



On the night that Mehdi had returned home from a three-week visit to his son Pedi, he had intended to have Siamek over for dinner. But when he called at the chess club, they said no one had seen him for at least two weeks. Siamek, he knew, had no phone in his room, and his near-deaf landlady did not take messages for him. So Mehdi decided to pay his first visit. That night he slowly climbed three flights of stairs to Siamek’s attic room, feeling his chest seize with every step. When he reached the top, he had to wait a full minute to catch his breath. He wondered how it was possible that Siamek, who weighed at least a hundred pounds more than he did, made this climb so many times.

He knocked on the door. When there was no answer, he rapped louder and called Siamek’s name. Years later, he still wouldn’t know what drove him to seek out Siamek’s elderly landlady on the ground floor, why he was so certain that Siamek was not out buying fast food for dinner as was his habit. He went back downstairs, argued insistently with the old woman until she gave him the extra key, and then climbed up a second time.

The key turned in the lock, and the door opened with a sound like a seal breaking. Not for the rest of his life would Mehdi forget the overpowering smell, nor the sight of Siamek’s large, sparsely furnished room in complete disarray. The bare mattress lay on the bed frame, surrounded by stained walls and

take-out food containers strewn on the ground with dirty clothes and wadded up garbage. Covering his nose and mouth with a handkerchief, Mehdi had taken only a step before he saw him. Siamek, not yet forty-four years old, lay still and staring in the middle of the room.



The bus was crowded, and there were very few seats left that Leila could see. It was fall break at the nearby university, and everywhere college students sat with enormous backpacks or lay huddled over both seats, feigning sleep. She shifted her bag and slowly moved forward. She saw an aisle seat empty beside an elderly woman in a purple hat, a window seat next to an obese man in a caramel colored suit, and nearer the back, an aisle seat next to a graying woman in an orange sari. The elderly woman was nearest. Prodded from behind, Leila took a step closer, and the woman stared up at her like a drowning mouse, her things spread over the seat beside her. She moved past.

Her father had barely acknowledged her that morning, and now that her anger had dulled, Leila was afraid for a moment that his love might operate on some sort of internal switch, to be turned on and off at will. She had almost approached him when he came into the kitchen for his ritual coffee and orange juice. He had silently boiled the water, added his spoonful of instant crystals, poured in the milk. She was afraid not to speak to him before leaving, but the only opening she knew was an apology, and so she too stayed silent. She had bitten her lip and locked her arms tightly around her body, until finally she heard the honk of the taxi.

The bus's motor grumbled, shook. Leila passed the large man sitting alone and moved toward the woman in the orange sari. She thought the woman's face appeared kinder than the others, that although she looked uninterested, she had not cultivated an openly hostile stare. As she slowly moved forwards, Leila could see that the woman, whose graying hair was tied back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck, was bending over something.

She guessed it was her bag. Leila thought she might offer to help her stow it in the upper storage. She imagined that the woman would smile and thank her, and that they would pass the bus ride together comfortably, exchanging a few words now and then. If the moment was right she even might tell her about her trip to see a man she had never met about a brother she had never known. But when she arrived she found that the woman had not been fussing with her purse, but with a very small boy. His overalls had come undone. As the woman carefully adjusted his straps, he looked up at Leila with huge dark eyes, from the place she had assumed was empty.



Mehdi prepared the guest room. He changed the plain white sheets to a lilac print, smoothed the coverlet, dusted the bedside table and lamp. He found a vase and filled it with some purple flowers from the backyard. He didn't know their names; his wife had been the gardener. He placed the flowers by the bed and opened the curtains.

When he was finished, he went into the living room to wait. He sat down in his armchair, closed his eyes and let himself grow quiet. Since Siamek's death his mind had been running in circles of recrimination, and suddenly he was very tired. He began to breathe slowly, letting air travel from his nostrils down into his abdomen, feeling his diaphragm rise and fall. He thought of Siamek, of how his last moments must have been, how he must have panted and struggled, the pain creeping from his chest into his left arm like a branch of fire. How he had died on his way to the door, gasping on the ground, perhaps wondering if his life at last had come to nothing.

If not the father, he would tell the girl, Mehdi thought, whatever she wanted to know. But he would say nothing of that.

Instead he would give her the marble chess set with which he and Siamek once played. Mehdi picked up the carved figure of the rook and felt its weight in the center of his hand. He squeezed it, draining the cold from the stone into his flesh. He

would give her this and everything he had salvaged from Siamek's room and packed into boxes—the photographs, the documents, the returned letters, and the ones never sent. Then perhaps, thought Mehdi, his eye lighting on the dancing Elvis on the wall, he might have his own packing to do.



Leila stood on the doorstep, the handle of her luggage biting through her hand. She had not yet rung the bell. She was letting herself stand silently in the cool shadow of the evergreen tree whose branches hung over the doorway. A breeze blew over her face, across her cheeks, through her hair, against the exposed base of her neck.

She heard the door open and then felt someone touch her shoulder. The bag was taken from her gently. Something slipped into her hand. When she opened her eyes, she looked, first into the anxious face of the old man standing in front of her, and then at the yellowing photograph he had given her.

First she saw her father, looking younger and handsomer than she had ever seen him. All the lines of his face were diminished or erased entirely, and he had hair, glossy, wavy hair that grew almost to the bottoms of his ears. He looked pleased, with exactly the same expression he wore when she first told him she wanted a doctorate. Beside him was her mother, whom she only recognized from the two studied portraits they had managed to take from Iran. Here her long hair hung free; it curled around her neck and lay against her cheek. She wore capris and a short-sleeved blouse. On her face wasn't the dreamy smile of a graduate or the poised expression of a new bride—instead she looked as if someone had just made her laugh.

“Come in, come in,” said the man. “Do you drink tea?” Leila looked up at him, at the deep lines around his mouth, the darkened skin gathered in bags beneath his eyes. She nodded to him, and he disappeared inside, his slippers slapping the bottoms of his heels. The breeze rustled the photograph in her hands.

This was the face she had never before seen, but that still

seemed familiar. Young and smiling, bright and still, Siamek stood with his arm linked in his mother's. He was handsome and dark-eyed, awkwardly thin. He smiled, and his smile was a vague echo of his father's. But Leila could see the space preserved between the shoulders of father and son, the stiffness of their postures as they leaned toward each other, yet never touched.

The man returned, holding out a mug of steaming tea in both hands. The rim was chipped, she noticed, at two places near the handle. She slipped the picture in her pocket, and took the tea from him; the warmth of it immediately seeped into her hands. The man said a word in Farsi; she knew it meant *come*. He lifted an arm, gesturing toward the interior, white carpeting, white walls. She nodded and shifted her hands on the cup. Again he invited her, and again she accepted, still standing in the doorway.

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