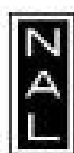


Rooftops of Tehran



Mahbod Seraji



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Rooftops of Tehran



Mahbod Seraji



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Chapter 1 - Summer of 1973 Tehran](#)

[Chapter 2 - Faheemeh's Tears and Zari's Wet Hair](#)

[Chapter 3 - Summer of 1973 Tehran](#)

[Chapter 4 - Suvashun](#)

[Chapter 5 - Summer of 1973 Tehran](#)

[Chapter 6 - Vignettes of Love](#)

[Chapter 7 - One More Story, Please](#)

[Chapter 8 - End of Summer 1973 Tehran](#)

[Chapter 9 - The Anarchist](#)

[Chapter 10 - My School and My Teachers](#)

[Chapter 11 - In the SAVAK's Prisons](#)

[Chapter 12 - The Devils That Broke the Windows](#)

[Chapter 13 - The Cost of the Bullet](#)

[Chapter 14 - Autumn of 1973 Tehran](#)

[Chapter 15 - The Rosebush](#)

[Chapter 16 - The Width of the Alley](#)

[Chapter 17 - Prove Your Innocence](#)

[Chapter 18 - Autumn of 1973 Mazandaran](#)

[Chapter 19 - Doctor's Candle](#)

[Chapter 20 - A Kiss](#)

[Chapter 21 - Lighting a Candle for Doctor](#)

[Chapter 22 - Winter of 1974 Roozbeh Psychiatric Hospital, Tehran](#)

[Chapter 23 - Ahmed's Star](#)

[Chapter 24 - The Color of Age](#)

[Chapter 25 - Caged Souls](#)

[Chapter 26 - The Eyes of an Angel](#)

[Chapter 27 - Shade in Shadow](#)

[Chapter 28 - An Incurable Disease](#)

[Chapter 29 - An Angel Calling](#)

[Chapter 30 - Enshallah](#)

[Chapter 31 - That Is All](#)

[Chapter 32 - Another Dawn](#)

[Chapter 33 - One More, Please](#)

[Chapter 34 - In the Silence of the Night](#)

[Dear Reader:](#)

[READERS GUIDE of Tehran](#)

Praise for

Rooftops of Tehran

“*Rooftops of Tehran* is a richly rendered first novel about courage, sacrifice, and the bonds of friendship and love. In clear, vivid detail, Mahbod Seraji opens the door to the fascinating world of Iran and provides a revealing glimpse into the life and customs of a country on the verge of revolution. A captivating read.”

—Gail Tsukiyama, author of *The Street of a Thousand Blossoms* and *The Samurai’s Garden*

“In his haunting debut novel, Mahbod Seraji brings humor and humanity to a story of secret love during the brutal last days of the Shah. Set against the background of repression that launched the Iranian revolution, Pasha and Zari’s story shows that love and hope among the young thrive even in the most oppressive of times. Seraji is a striking new talent.”

—Sandra Dallas, author of *Tallgrass*

“*Rooftops of Tehran* combines a coming-of-age love story with a compelling tale of struggle against dictatorship. You learn a lot about Iranian culture while coming to understand characters with universal appeal. This would make a great movie.”

—Reese Erlich, author of *The Iran Agenda: The Real Story of U.S. Policy and the Middle East Crisis*

“*Rooftops of Tehran* evoked many memories, along with tears and smiles, of starry nights on rooftops, long-lost loves, and intense, passionate feelings of anger at the injustices and the absurd excesses of the Pahlavi regime.”

—Nahid Mozaffari, editor of *Strange Times, My Dear: The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*

“*Rooftops of Tehran* takes an uncommon and refreshing view of Iran and reveals how an American immigrant is born out of a young foreigner’s desperation for self-determination and social freedom.”

—Susanne Pari, author of *The Fortune Catcher*

“What a profound pleasure to discover such solid storytelling and splendid prose in a debut novel. With the voice of a poet, Seraji has told a universal tale of love, loss, and ultimately of hope. It is the hope, most of all, that will linger long after the last page is turned. Thank God for authors like Seraji who show us that no matter how distant apart our worlds may be, in the humanness of our hearts, we are all united.”

—William Kent Krueger, author of *Red Knife* and the Cork O’Connor series

“A stirring story about the loss of innocence, *Rooftops of Tehran* reveals a side of Iran understood by few Westerners. An ambitious first novel—full of humor, originality, and meaning.”

—John Shors, author of *Beneath a Marble Sky* and *Beside A Burning Sea*

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Mahbod Seraji



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Winter of 1974 Roozbeh Psychiatric Hospital, Tehran

I hear someone's voice chanting, and the repetitive verses lap like water at the edge of my consciousness.

If I had a book, I would read it.

If I had a song, I would sing it.

I look around until I see an old man standing a few meters away chanting in a steady, empty tone. The place does not look familiar to me. The blue robe that covers my body, the wheelchair I am sitting in, the sunlight creeping between the shades that warms me—all feel strange.

If I knew a dance, I would dance it.

If I knew a rhyme, I would chant it.

If I had a life, I would risk it.

If I could be free, I would chance it.

Outside in the yard, men of all shapes and ages shuffle around in blue robes. There is something peculiar about each of them. They look lost.

Suddenly a surge of emotions fills my chest and rushes into my throat. A little nurse with a kind, apple-like full face that resembles an apple runs up to me and plants her hands on my shoulders and screams, "Help me out here, help me out!" A man in a white uniform runs over and tries to hold me down.

"Stay in your chair, honey. Stay in your chair," Apple Face shouts, which means I must be moving. I focus on sitting still, and look toward the old man on the far side of the room. He is gazing at me and he frantically repeats his mantra:

If I had a horse, I would ride it.

If I had a horse, I would ride it.

If I had a horse . . .

I am taken to a room with a bed, and Apple Face says, "I'm going to give you a sedative to make you feel better, darling."

I feel a pinch in my arm, and suddenly my head and arms become unbearably heavy and my eyes slide shut.

Summer of 1973 Tehran

My Friends, My Family, and My Alley

Sleeping on the roof in the summer is customary in Tehran. The dry heat of the day cools after midnight, and those of us who sleep on the rooftops wake with the early sun on our faces and fresh air in our lungs. My mother is strictly against it, and reminds me each evening, “Hundreds of people fall off the roofs every year.” My best friend, Ahmed, and I trade hidden smiles with each other, then climb the stairs to spend our nights under stars that seem close enough to touch. The alley below settles into a patchwork of streetlight, shadow, and sound. A car hums slowly down the deserted street, cautious not to wake anyone, as a stray dog in the distance releases a string of officious barks.

“I hear your mother calling,” Ahmed mumbles in the dark. I smile, aiming a good-natured kick that he easily rolls away from.

Our house is the tallest in the neighborhood, which makes our roof an ideal spot for stargazing. In fact, naming stars for our friends and the people we love is one of our favorite pastimes.

“Does everyone have a star?” Ahmed asks.

“Only good people.”

“And the better you are the bigger your star, right?”

“Bigger and brighter,” I say, as I do every time he asks the same question.

“And your star guides you when you’re in trouble, right?”

“Your star and the stars of the people you love.”

Ahmed closes one eye and lifts his thumb to block out one of the brighter stars. “I’m tired of looking at your big fat face.”

“Shut up and go to sleep then,” I say, laughing, letting my gaze relax into the velvety emptiness between each pinprick of light. My eyes travel down the sky until they rest on the familiar rise and fall of the Alborz Mountains, which serpentine between the desert and the blue-green Caspian Sea. I get distracted for a moment trying to decide if the darkness is black or so deeply blue that it just appears inky in comparison.

“I wonder why people are so unabashedly afraid of the dark,” I ponder, and Ahmed chuckles. I know without asking that he is amused by my eccentric vocabulary, the product of a lifetime of heavy reading. My father pulled Ahmed and me aside one day and asked me, in front of family friends and relatives, what I thought life was about. I promptly said that life was a random series of beautiful, composed vignettes, loosely tied together by a string of characters and time. My father’s friend

actually applauded, much to my embarrassment. Ahmed leaned over and whispered that I would soon be inaugurated as the oldest seventeen-year-old in the world, especially if I kept saying things like “unabashedly” and “beautifully composed vignettes.”

Ahmed and I have just finished the eleventh grade and will be entering our last year of high school in the fall. I look forward to the end of preparatory school as much as the next seventeen-year-old, but this lively anticipation is tempered by my father’s plans to send me to the United States to study civil engineering. Long ago, my father worked as a ranger, protecting the nationalized forests from poachers who cut down the trees illegally for personal profit. He now works in an office, managing an entire region with an army of rangers reporting to him.

“Iran is in dire need of engineers,” Dad reminds me whenever he gets the chance. “We’re on the verge of transforming ourselves from a traditional agricultural country to an industrial one. A person with an engineering degree from an American university secures a great future for himself and his family, in addition to enjoying the prestige of being called ‘Mr. Engineer’ for the rest of his life.” I love my father, and I would never disobey him, but I hate math, I hate the idea of becoming an engineer, and I would hate being called Mr. Engineer. In my dreams I major in literature and study the philosophy of the ancient Greeks, evolution, Marxism, psychoanalysis, Erfan, and Buddhism. Or, I major in film and become a writer or a director, someone who has something worthwhile to say.

For now I live with my parents in a middle-class neighborhood. We have a typical Iranian house with a modest yard, a large guest room, and a *hose*—a small pool in the front yard. In our neighborhood, just like any other in Tehran, tall walls separate houses that have been built connected to each other. Our home has two full levels, and my room occupies a small section of the third floor where a huge terrace is connected to the roof by a bulky mass of steel steps. Ours is the tallest house in the neighborhood, and has a southern exposure.

“I wouldn’t live in a home with a northern exposure if it were given to me for free,” my mother states repeatedly. “They never get any sun. They’re a breeding ground for germs.” My mother never finished high school, yet she speaks about health issues with the authority of a Harvard graduate. She has a remedy for every ailment: herbal tea to cure depression, liquidated camel thorns to smash kidney stones, powdered flowers to annihilate sinus infections, dried leaves that destroy acne, and pills for growing as tall as a tree—despite the fact that she stands an impressive five feet tall in stocking feet.

The peace of each summer night fades with the noises of families starting their day, and our alley bustles with kids of all ages. Boys shout and scuffle as they chase cheap plastic soccer balls, while girls go from house to house, doing what girls do together. Women congregate in different parts of the alley, making it easy to tell who likes whom by the way they assemble. Ahmed has divided these gatherings into three groups: the east, west, and central gossip committees.

Ahmed is a tall skinny kid with dark features and a brilliant smile. His strong but slender body, bold, broad jaw, and bright hazel eyes make him the picture of health, according to my mother’s expert opinion. He’s well liked in the neighborhood, and funny. I tell him he could become a great comedian if he took his God-given talent more seriously.

“Yes, more seriously,” he replies. “I can become the most serious clown in the country!”

I’ve known Ahmed since I was twelve years old, when my family first moved to the neighborhood.

We met for the first time at school when three bullies were beating me up. All the other kids stood by and watched, but Ahmed rushed to my aid. The boys were tall, big, and ugly, and despite our heroic attempts we both took a beating.

“I’m Pasha,” I introduced myself after the fight.

Ahmed smiled and reached over for a handshake. “What was the fight about?” he asked.

I laughed. “You didn’t know? Why did you help me?”

“Three to one! I have a problem with that. Of course, I knew they’d still take us, but at least it wasn’t as unfair as three guys thrashing one.”

I knew right then that Ahmed was going to be my best friend forever. His gallantry and upbeat attitude won me over instantly. The experience bound us together and prompted my father, an ex-heavyweight boxing champion, to start teaching us how to box—much to my mother’s dismay.

“You’re going to make them violent,” she would complain to my unsympathetic father. To make things right, every night after dinner she would hold out a glass of amber liquid that smelled like horse urine on a hot summer day. “This will reverse what your father is doing to your temper,” she assured me, while forcing me to drink the nauseating brew.

I loved boxing, but my mother’s remedy nearly drove me to quit.

After a few months of training, as our punches became crisp—short and quick, but heavy when they needed to be—I began to ache for a rematch with the three bullies at school. My father overheard our plans for revenge and intervened.

“Sit down, Mr. Pasha,” he said one day after practice. Then he pointed to Ahmed. “Would you join us, please?”

“Of course, Mr. Shahed,” Ahmed responded, and as he was sitting next to me, he whispered, “I think we’re in trouble, Mr. Pasha!”

“When one learns how to box,” Dad started thoughtfully, “he joins the fraternity of athletes who never raise a hand against people weaker than themselves.”

My mother stopped what she had been doing and walked up to stand sternly next to my father.

“But, Dad, if we don’t beat up people weaker than ourselves, who do we beat up?” I asked, stunned. “And wouldn’t it be dumb to pick on people stronger than ourselves anyway?”

Dad was doing his best not to look at Mom, who was staring at him like a tiger checking out a deer right before the final, fateful dash.

“I taught you how to box so you could defend yourself,” he mumbled. “I don’t want you to go looking for a fight.”

Ahmed and I couldn’t believe what we were hearing.

“I want you to promise me that you will always respect the code of our fraternity,” my father insisted.

We must have been slow to react.

“I want you to promise,” he repeated, his voice rising.

And so Ahmed and I grudgingly joined the fraternity of athletes who never beat up bullies who break the faces of kids weaker than themselves. At the time, of course, we had no idea that such a fraternity never existed.

“Iraj is lucky your dad made us promise,” Ahmed says later, making us both laugh.

Iraj is a small, scruffy kid with a long pointed nose whose sunburned features make him look Indian. He’s smart, has the best grades in our school, and loves physics and mathematics, the two subjects I hate most.

I am convinced Iraj likes Ahmed’s oldest sister, because he can’t keep his eyes off her when she is in the alley. Everyone knows you don’t fancy a friend’s sister, as if she were a girl from another neighborhood. If I were Ahmed and caught Iraj checking out my sister, I’d kick the shit out of him. But I’m not Ahmed. “Hey,” he’ll shout, trying hard not to smile when he startles Iraj, “stop looking at her or I’ll break my pledge to the sacred brotherhood of the boxing fraternity.”

“Sacred brotherhood of the boxing fraternity?” I whisper under my breath with a smile. “Brotherhood and fraternity mean the same thing. You shouldn’t use them in the same sentence.”

“Oh, you shut up.” Ahmed laughs.

Iraj is the chess champion of our neighborhood. He is so good that no one is willing to play against him anymore. When we play soccer in the alley, Iraj plays chess against himself.

“Who’s winning?” Ahmed asks with a smirk. Iraj ignores him. “Have you ever beaten yourself?” Ahmed asks. “You could, you know—if you weren’t so fucking preoccupied with my sister.”

“I’m not preoccupied with your sister,” Iraj mumbles, rolling his eyes.

“Right,” Ahmed replies, nodding. “If you have any trouble beating yourself, let me know and I’ll be happy to do it for you.”

“You know,” I tease, “I used to get mad at him for looking at your sister, but it might not be so bad to have a chess champion as a brother-in-law.”

“Bite your tongue,” Ahmed growls, “or I’ll raid your mother’s pantry to mix you a special brew that will grow hair on your tongue.”

The threat has some weight, considering the way my mother has applied her unique brand of knowledge and listened to her gut to diagnose me as an extreme introvert.

“Do you know what happens to people who keep everything to themselves?” she asks, not waiting for my answer. “They get sick.” When I object that I’m not an introvert, she reminds me of the time I was four years old and fell down the steps. My two aunts, two uncles, and grandparents were visiting us that day, and my mother estimated that watching me tumble down two flights of stairs nearly caused two heart attacks, three strokes, and a handful of small ulcers.

“You broke your shin in three places!” she chides. “The doctor said he’d seen grown men cry after a break like that, but not you. Do you know what that kind of stress does to your body?”

“No,” I say.

“It causes cancer.”

Then she spits three times to atone for the thought.

In order to cure my introversion, she insists I drink a dusky concoction that looks and smells like used motor oil. I complain that her remedy tastes horrible, and she tells me to be quiet and stop whining.

“I thought this potion was to bring me out of my shell,” I remind her.

“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. “Introverts end up as lonely poets or destitute writers.”

“So,” Ahmed ponders one day, “the engine oil makes you an extrovert, and the horse urine helps you crawl back into your shell.” He shakes his head in empathy. “You are going to be one fucked-up person by the time your mother gets done with you.”

Faheemeh's Tears and Zari's Wet Hair

Our summer nights on the roof are spent basking in the wide-open safety of our bird's-eye view. There are no walls around what we say, or fears shaping what we think. I spend hours listening to stories of Ahmed's silent encounters with Faheemeh, the girl he loves. His voice softens and his face quiets as he describes how she threw back her long black hair while looking at him—and how that must mean she loves him. Why else would she strain her neck to communicate with him? My father says that Persians believe in silent communication; a look or a gesture imparts far more than a book full of words. My father is a great silent communicator. When I behave badly, he just gives me a dirty look that hurts more than a thousand slaps in the face.

I listen while Ahmed's voice chatters on about Faheemeh, but my gaze usually wanders into our neighbors' yard, where a girl named Zari lives with her parents and her little brother, Keivan. I've never seen Faheemeh up close, so when Ahmed talks about her I picture Zari in my mind: her delicate cheekbones, her smiling eyes, and her pale, soft skin. Most summer evenings Zari sits at the edge of her family's little *hose* under a cherry tree, dangling her shapely feet in the cool water as she reads. I'm careful not to let my eyes linger too long because she is engaged to my friend and mentor, Ramtin Sobhi, a third-year political science major at the University of Tehran whom everyone, including her parents, calls Doctor. It's low to fancy a friend's girl, and I shove all thoughts of Zari from my head every time I think of Doctor, but Ahmed's lovesick ramblings make it hard for me to keep my mind clear.

Every day Ahmed bikes ten minutes to Faheemeh's neighborhood in the hope of getting a glimpse of her. He says she has two older brothers who protect her like hawks, and that everyone in the neighborhood knows that messing with their sister means getting a broken nose, a dislocated jaw, and a big black eggplant under at least one eye. Ahmed 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 crush him into little pieces.

Not one to be thwarted, Ahmed picks a day when Faheemeh's brothers are in the alley and intentionally rides his bike into a wall. He moans and groans with pain, and Faheemeh's brothers take him inside their home and give him a couple of aspirin, then immobilize his injured wrist by wrapping a piece of fabric around it. Faheemeh is only a few steps away, and knows full well what the handsome stranger is up to.

Ahmed now rides his bike to Faheemeh's alley without a worry in the world, spending hours with Faheemeh's brothers and talking about everything from the members of this year's Iranian national soccer team to next year's potential honorees. He says he doesn't mind that her brothers bore him to death as long as he is close to her. They play soccer all afternoon in the alley and Ahmed insists on

playing goalie, even though he stinks in that position. While the other kids chase the ball in the scorching heat of Tehran's afternoons, Ahmed stands still. Supposedly he's defending his team's goal, but really he's watching Faheemeh, who watches him from the roof of her house.

After only a few games, Ahmed is forced to abdicate his post as the goalie. He is so preoccupied with Faheemeh that he is never prepared for the opponent's attackers and his team always loses by at least five or six points. When Ahmed begins to play forward his team starts to win again, but now he has to run after the ball, which means he can no longer exchange silent looks with Faheemeh.

So Ahmed comes to me with a plan. I am to accompany him to Faheemeh's alley the next day. He will introduce me to his new friends and will make sure that I end up on the opposite team. I will aim at his knee during a crucial play and he'll fake a bad fall and a serious injury. Then he will have no choice but to play as goalie again. He will be a goalie in agony, playing despite his pain, and that will undoubtedly impress Faheemeh.

I agree to go along but worry deep down about what Faheemeh might think of me after I knock Ahmed down. I feel better when I imagine the day we tell her the whole thing was a setup to get Ahmed back in the goalie position.

"Don't hurt me for real, now," Ahmed warns with a smile on his face.

"Make sure the orthopedic surgeon is on call, pal," I respond, getting into the spirit.

"Oh, come on. You know I have fragile bones. Just touch me lightly and I'll do the rest."

The plan is carried out masterfully. Ahmed deserves an Oscar for his portrayal of a boy in pain, and a gold medal for playing goalie after his dreadful injury. Looking at his face, which glows with the knowledge that Faheemeh is watching, I worry that he might really hurt himself with his courageous dives to the left, to the right, and under the feet of our attackers—all of this on asphalt. We can't score on him. He scrapes his hands and elbows, and tears his pants at the knees. Each time he stops us he grimaces with pain, releases the ball, and looks up toward the roof where Faheemeh is watching attentively. I even see her smile at him once.

One of Faheemeh's brothers notices that I'm looking toward the roof, and I know from that moment on he doesn't like me anymore, just as I don't like Iraj for staring at Ahmed's sister. He doesn't shake my hand when I say good-bye to everyone. I size him up surreptitiously. He's taller and bigger than I am. I leave with the comfort of knowing that I would not be letting down the sacred brotherhood of the boxing fraternity if he ever decided to be an asshole to me or to Ahmed.

A couple of weeks pass, and I'm sitting on our roof in the dark, my ears and eyes filled with the rustle and sway of the light wind that bends the treetops, when I hear the door to Zari's yard open, then shut.

Don't look, I think resolutely, but my body resorts to quick, shallow breaths as soon as it recognizes the sound. *It could just be Keivan*, I reason. I decide to close my eyes, but my heart races as I realize that doing so has only sharpened my hearing. Bare feet pad across the yard, then the water in the *hoo* begins to murmur with the slow churning of her legs as the pages of her book turn with the so

rhythmic hiss so familiar from my own hours spent reading. She's read four pages by the time Ahmed arrives on my roof. He sits silently on the short wall that runs between our rooftops and lights a cigarette with shaking hands. The momentary illumination from the match reveals tears in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, my chest growing tight at the expression on his face.

He shakes his head no, but I don't believe him. We Persians as a people are too deeply immersed in misery to resist despair when it knocks on our door.

"Are you sure?" I insist, and he nods his head yes.

I decide to leave him alone because that's what I wish people would do for me when I don't feel like talking.

He sits as still as stone for a few minutes as the cigarette's glowing coal creeps toward his fingers then whispers, "She has a suitor."

"Who has a suitor?" I ask, glancing below at Zari; her ivory feet stir the moon's reflection on the water's surface so that it shimmers like liquid gold.

"Faheemeh. A guy who lives a couple of doors down from them is sending his parents to her house tomorrow night."

It feels like someone knocked the wind out of me. I don't know what to say. People who insist on sticking their noses into other people's business seldom know what to say or do. I wonder why they ask in the first place. I pretend to study the blinking city lights that sprawl across the shadowed distance.

"When did you find out?" I finally ask.

"After you left this afternoon, her brothers and I went into her yard to get some cool water and that's when they told me."

"Was she around?"

"Yes," he says, looking up hard at the sky to keep the tears from falling down his face. "She was pouring water from a pitcher into my glass when they told me." He remembers his cigarette and takes a big puff. "I was sitting in a chair and she was standing over me, actually bending over me. She looked at my eyes the whole time, never blinked." Ahmed shakes his head as his lips twist into the ghost of a smile. "She was so close I could feel her breath on my face, and her skin smelled clean-like soap, but sweeter. One of her brothers asked if I was going to congratulate their little sister, but I couldn't make my voice come out of my throat." Ahmed lets his face and his tears fall as he drops the spent cigarette and steps on it.

"She's too young," I whisper. "For crying out loud, how old is she, seventeen? How can they marry off a seventeen-year-old kid?"

Ahmed shakes his head again, mute.

"Maybe her parents will reject him," I say, to plant hope in his heart.

"Her family loves him," he says with a short bitter laugh as he pulls another cigarette from the pack. "He's a twenty-six-year-old college graduate who works for the Agriculture Ministry, owns a car, and will soon be buying his own home in Tehran Pars. They won't say no to him." He lights the

cigarette, then holds the pack out in my direction. I picture my father appearing unexpectedly and pinning me down with one of his dirty looks, the ones that hurt more than a thousand slaps in the face. I shake my head no.

I look at Ahmed's sad face and wish I could do something to help him out. This is a historic night for both of us. We're experiencing the first major personal crisis of our young lives. It's sad, but I must admit, on some level it's also exciting. It makes me feel grown-up.

"Do you know how bad this feels?" Ahmed asks between puffs.

"Well," I begin, wanting desperately to carry his pain, "I've only read about it in books," I confess somewhat embarrassed. Then I look toward Zari's yard, and add, "But I think I can imagine."

Late the next afternoon, Ahmed asks me to go to Faheemeh's alley with him. I do, despite my apprehension about seeing Faheemeh's brothers again, especially the one who hates me for being like Iraj. The sun has just set, and the lights in the alley are springing on one by one. Some people have just watered their trees and hosed their sidewalks, as is customary in Tehran, and the scent of wet dust makes the dry heat of the evening feel more tolerable. A group of kids is playing soccer and making a lot of noise. I figure it must be the final game of the evening. The ladies stand close to each other trading talk while the younger girls run arm in arm, giggling.

I have never seen Ahmed so consumed by grief. We walk up and down the alley, and he slows every time we reach Faheemeh's house. "I can feel her on the other side of these walls," he says, resting his forehead against the stone and closing his eyes. "She knows I'm here," he whispers. "We're breathing the same air." Some kids walk by and recognize Ahmed. They want to chat, but neither Ahmed nor I are in a mood to talk, and we continue to pace. When we reach Faheemeh's house again he stops and presses both fists to the stone, like a tired warrior at the base of a fortress.

Inside, a bunch of adults are discussing a lifetime's commitment between two young people. The mother of the bride-to-be is usually happy and proud, unless the suitor is a real loser. The mother of the groom-to-be is civilized and calm; she makes mental notes to use later if a deal cannot be consummated, details that will stay fixed in her mind until the couple is happily married off. Who knows what will happen between two strangers? Good information can always tilt the balance in his favor if the union should fail. Everything is fair game, from the color of the wallpaper in the living room to the size of the future mother-in-law's bottom. The fathers are agreeable and more concerned about drinking, eating, and bragging about the stuff fathers brag about: people they know in high places, the bargain they got on a prime piece of land by the Caspian Sea. Then there is the cast of aunts and uncles, best friends and family members, all happy to be there because they have nothing better to do with their time.

Most of the discussions will focus on money. What does the groom have? Does he own a house? Does he drive a car? What model and year is it? Hopefully it's an American car, a Buick or a Ford. How much is the dowry? How much does the family of the groom pay the family of the bride for this auspicious occasion? What would be the alimony if there were a divorce in the future?

The bride- and groom-to-be normally sit far apart and don't speak. They even avoid looking at each other. I know Ahmed is wondering what Faheemeh is thinking, sitting quietly in that crowded room. That's what I would be worried about if, for example, I loved Zari and she were being married off

someone other than Doctor. I would wonder if Zari were thinking of me. I would wonder if she had made herself pretty, and if she had, I would be questioning why. Doesn't she want my rival to think that she is ugly, and not worthy of marriage? I would be so jealous of the man who would be looking into her beautiful blue eyes, thinking of embracing her, touching her face, feeling her warm body against his. *God, I'm so glad I don't love Zari; poor Ahmed must be going through hell.*

We wait until ten o'clock, but no one comes out of Faheemeh's house. We ride our bikes back to our neighborhood, have a quick dinner, then retreat to the roof. Hours crawl by in heavy silence. The outline of Mount Alborz, usually uplifting, seems to huddle in the growing dark like a lonesome dog. The heat has been unusually persistent all day, and we sit and sweat without speaking for what feels like days. What do you say to a seventeen-year-old boy who has fallen in love with a seventeen-year-old girl who is about to be auctioned off for a few thousand Persian toomans of dowry and the dubious promise of happiness?

"I think you should tell her that you love her," I blurt, suddenly.

Ahmed exhales with a derisive snort. "What good will that do? Besides, don't you think she already knows?"

"*Maybe* she knows . . . *maybe* she thinks that *maybe* you love her—but she doesn't know for sure, does she? You haven't told her how you feel, and you certainly haven't done anything to show her."

"I communicate in silence with her every day," he mumbles.

His answer makes me smile. "Ahmed, she's the only one who can stop this wedding. Her parents may still force her to marry him, so there's no guarantee that your actions would change anything, but you have to give her a reason to fight."

"You think she might?" Ahmed asks, genuine wonder trembling in his voice.

"I think she might if you intervened, and if she doesn't, what have you lost?"

The light above Zari's door blinks on, and she comes into her yard and kneels gracefully at the edge of the *hose*. The night has been slow to cool, and she leans down and to the side to wet her hair, dipping it in the water, then twisting it artfully and pinning it to her head so that the water slides down her neck and back. I'm not sure how long I've been looking into Zari's yard when I feel Ahmed staring at me.

"So," he says, scratching the top of his head thoughtfully, "you think if someone walked up to Zari and told her he loved her, she would reconsider marrying Doctor?"

"That's not . . . that's different," I stutter. "Zari wants to marry Doctor, so that's not a fair question, and this is not about Zari and me. I mean, this is about you and Faheemeh."

Ahmed bites his lower lip to mask his smile, then asks, "You think she would go against her parents' wishes?"

"I said Zari's situation is different!" I bark back.

"I didn't mean Zari. I was talking about Faheemeh." This time Ahmed doesn't bother to hide his smile. "So you think she would go against her parents' wishes?" he repeats.

I shake my head slightly to dislodge any more thoughts of Zari, then fix my friend with a confident stare and answer, "People do amazing things for love. Books are full of wonderful stories about the

kind of stuff, and stories aren't just fantasies, you know. They're so much a part of the people who write them that they practically teach their readers invaluable lessons about life."

Ahmed notes the gleam in my eye, shakes his head and chuckles. "I know, I should read more."

I wake the next day alone, squinting at the hot sun hanging dead center in the sky, and realize I must have slept late. My waking fog clears sharply as I notice that Ahmed is already gone. I run downstairs, pull my shoes on, and mumble a hello to my mother, who is heading up the hallway with a large glass of her special engine oil for me. I grimace, then sprint past her into the yard to my bike.

My mother yells, "Where're you going? You haven't eaten breakfast!"

"No time!" I shout as I'm jumping on my bike, and hear the familiar muttering of my mother cursing under her breath.

I pedal as fast as I can to Faheemeh's alley, and my heart sinks as I round the corner. A bunch of kids are holding back Faheemeh's two brothers, and Ahmed's face is covered with blood. There's lots of screaming and yelling, and Faheemeh's oldest brother is telling Ahmed to get lost. Ahmed is standing quietly, with no one holding him back. I jump off my bike and run up to him.

"What's going on?" I ask, anxiously. When Ahmed doesn't speak, I assume the worst and whirl to face our attackers. I will my body to become loose and ready, bouncing lightly on the balls of my feet and shaking my hands briefly to warm them before I curl them into fists.

Ahmed smiles gently and grabs my arm. "I followed your advice. I was trying to tell Faheemeh to love her," he explains, pointing up to the weeping girl on the roof, "but I think the whole world heard."

Faheemeh is watching us, knowing full well that a seventeen-year-old boy has taken his first step toward becoming a man, and in the process has made her feel more like a woman than all the aunts, uncles, and formalities of the night before. If she must marry a man her parents have chosen for her, at least she knows that she is loved by someone with enough courage to defy tradition.

I can only hope that she will summon her own courage to defy her parents, for Ahmed's sake.

A few nights later, at dinner, my mother mentions a rumor she's heard about a sweet young girl in a nearby neighborhood who is being forced to marry a man she doesn't love. "I don't know her," Mom says, "but I feel horrible for her." I listen hard, but keep my face still. "I hear that she has locked herself in a room and refuses to come out, eat, or speak to anyone," Mom reports.

My father shakes his head. "It's time for the parents in this country to learn that the souls of the children are more important than tradition," he says. "You young people need to assume responsibility for your own futures," he tells me. "If someone's old enough to be married off, then they're sure as hell old enough to decide who they should marry." My mother nods in agreement.

Sitting out on the roof after dinner that night, I smell Ahmed's cigarette and hear his steps on the stairs long before he settles down beside me.

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