

# MEMORIES

Things I've Been Silent About

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**Azar Nafisi**



R A N D O M   H O U S E

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***Also by Azar Nafisi***

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THINGS  
I'VE BEEN  
*memories* SILENT  
ABOUT



AZAR NAFISI

*In memory of my parents, Ahmad and Nezhat Najafabadi*

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*To my brother, Mohammad Najafabadi  
and my family, Bijan, Negar, and Dara Najafabadi*

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Most men cheat on their wives to have mistresses. My father cheated on my mother to have a happy family life. I felt sorry for him, and in one sense took it upon myself to fill the empty spaces in his life. I collected his poems, listened to his woes, and helped him choose appropriate gifts, first for my mother and then for the women he fell in love with. He later claimed that most of his relations with these other women were not sexual, that what he yearned for was the feeling they gave him of warmth and approval. Approval! My parents taught me how deadly that desire could be.

As a family we were fond of telling stories. My father left behind a published memoir and a far more interesting unpublished one, and over fifteen hundred pages of diaries. Mother did not write but she told us stories from her past, usually ending them by saying, But I never said a word, I kept silent. She genuinely believed that she never talked about her personal life, although in her own way she often spoke, it seemed, about little else. She would not have approved of my writing a memoir, especially a family memoir. Nor did I imagine that one day I would find myself writing about my own parents. It is such a strong part of Iranian culture to never reveal private matters: we don't air our dirty laundry in public, as Mother would say, and besides, private lives are trivial and not worth writing about. Useful life stories are what matter, like the memoir my father finally published, a cardboard version of himself. I no longer believe that we can keep silent. We never really do, mind you. In one way or another we articulate what has happened to us through the kind of people we become.

My father started to keep a diary when I was four years old. The diary is addressed to me. He gave it to me decades later, when I had children of my own. The first few pages are about how to be good, how to be considerate toward others. Then he starts complaining about my mother. He complains that she no longer remembers that she once liked him and enjoyed his company. He writes that, although I am just a child, I am his only solace and support. He advises me that if I ever marry I should seek to be a true friend and companion to my husband. He describes one incident when he and my mother were quarreling and I, like "an angel of peace," tried to distract and entertain them. My empathy was as dangerous as any clandestine activity: here was a sin Mother could not forgive. My brother and I tried to please them both, but no matter how hard we tried—and we tried very hard—they were never happy. My mother would turn her head away from us and gaze into the distance with a knowing nod to some invisible interlocutor, seeming to say, Didn't I tell you? Didn't I?, as if she knew my father would be unfaithful to her long before he even considered it. She acted upon this knowledge as an accomplished fact and seemed to take a perverse pleasure when it all became true.



*My father and mother, Nezhat and Ahmad Nafisi.*

When my mother was very ill, a few years after my family and I had left Tehran for the United States, I was told that for many days she had refused to go to the hospital unless the lock to her apartment was changed. *That man* and his floozy would break in just as they'd done before, she muttered, and loot what was left of her possessions.

"*That man* and his floozy" were my father and his second wife, whom she blamed for all of her misfortunes, including the mysterious disappearance of her collection of gold coins and two trunks of silver. No one, of course, believed her. Accustomed as we were to my mother's fictions, we indulged her without paying much attention.

She would evoke shadowy figures who, one by one, had been lost to her—her mother, her father, her first husband—and hold us responsible. Ultimately, not one of us was able to step out of her invented world. She demanded that we remain faithful not to her, but to her story.

My father's fictions were more straightforward, or so I believed for a long time. He communicated with us through stories about his life, his family, and about Iran—a subject he was almost obsessed with—drawing on the classic texts of Persian literature. This is how I first discovered literature and learned about my country's history. He also told us his version of my mother's fictions, so that we constantly vacillated between two shadow worlds.

All our lives my brother and I were caught by the fictions my parents told us—fictions about themselves as well as others. Each wanted us to judge the other in his or her favor. Sometimes I felt cheated, as if they never allowed us to have a story of our own. It is only now that I understand how much their story was also mine.

**T**hose who are close to us, when they die, divide our world. There is the world of the living, which we finally, in one way or another, succumb to, and then there is the domain of the dead that, like an imaginary friend (or foe) or a secret concubine, constantly beckons, reminding us of our loss. What is memory but a ghost that lurks at the corners of the mind, interrupting our normal course of life, disrupting our sleep in order to remind us of some acute pain or pleasure, something silenced or ignored? We miss not only their presence, or how they felt about us, but ultimately how they allowed us to feel about ourselves or them.

How did my mother allow us to feel about her? The only way I can bring myself to confront her loss is to ask this question. At times I have wondered if she wasn't always lost to me, but when she was alive I was too preoccupied

with resisting her to realize it. There was something touching in the way she talked about herself and her past as if she too were an invention, occupying the body of another woman who teasingly appeared to us in glimmers, like a firefly I am after those firefly moments now. What did they reveal of my mother and of us?

In my last years in Iran, I became fixated on my mother's memories. I even took from her several photographs. It seemed the only way of gaining some access to her past. I became a memory thief, collecting her photographs alongside pictures of the old Tehran in which she grew up, married, had her children. My curiosity veered into the realm of obsession. Yet none of this really helped. The photographs, the descriptions, at some point even the facts, are insufficient. They reveal certain details, but they remain lifeless fragments. What I am searching for is the gaps—the silences. This is how I see the past: as an excavation. You sift through the rubble, pick up one fragment here, another there, label it and record where you found it, noting the time and date of discovery. It is not just the foundations I am looking for but something at once more and less tangible.

I do not mean this book to be a political or social commentary, or a useful life story. I want to tell the story of a family that unfolds against the backdrop of a turbulent era in Iran's political and cultural history. There are many stories about these times, between the birth of my grandmother at the start of the twentieth century and my daughter's birth at its end, marked by the two revolutions that shaped Iran, causing so many divisions and contradictions that transient turbulence became the only thing of permanence.

My grandmother was born when Iran was ruled by a destabilized absolutist monarchy and was under rigid religious laws that sanctioned stoning, polygamy, and the marriage of girls as young as nine. Women were scarcely allowed to leave their homes, and when they did they were chaperoned and covered from head to toe. There were no schools for women, although some among the nobility provided their daughters with private tutors. And yet there was another side to this story, pale flickers of a future revealing itself through the cultural and political crisis that would upend all those old rules. My grandmother witnessed the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, the first of its kind in the Middle East, which helped usher in modern Iran, galvanizing different strata of society, including the progressive clerics, minorities, intellectuals, some members of the nobility, and women, some of whom had started to support the revolutionaries, setting up underground groups and demanding access to education. By 1912 Morgan Shuster, an American financial advisor to Iran, marveled at the leaps Iranian women had made in such a short period of time, embracing new freedoms that had taken years, even centuries, for Western women to achieve. "The Persian women since 1907 had become almost at bond the most progressive, not to say radical, in the world," he said. "That this statement upsets the idea of centuries makes no difference. It is fact."



*My daughter, Negar (second from left), with her classmates in Tehran. All the female schoolchildren were forced to wear the veil after the revolution.*

How can I describe the fragile, conflicted nature of my mother's childhood and youth in the mid-1920s and '30s, ~~by which time the flickering possibilities had taken over to such an extent that she could appear in public without a veil, go to a French school, and meet and fall in love with her first husband while dancing at a wedding—all impossible two decades before.~~ Yet there was another aspect to her times, a refusal to relinquish the vanquished past. When, in 1936, Reza Shah Pahlavi, in his efforts to hasten the process of modernization, issued a mandate that made the unveiling of women mandatory and banned traditional clothing for men, my paternal grandmother, like so many other Iranian women, refused to leave her home. Reza Shah's edict was finally rescinded in 1941, although its memory still ignites fresh questions and divisions.

By the time I was growing up, in the 1950s and '60s, we took our education and our books and parties and movies for granted. We witnessed women becoming active in all walks of life, governing in Parliament—among them, briefly, my own mother—and becoming ministers. But then, by 1984, my own daughter, born five years after the Islamic Revolution, would witness the return of the same laws that had been repealed during my grandmother's and my mother's lifetimes. My daughter would be forced to wear a veil in first grade and would be punished for showing her hair in public. Her generation would eventually find its own brand of courage and resistance.

In this book my interest is not in a general recitation of historical times but rather in those fragile intersections—the places where moments in an individual's private life and personality resonate with and reflect a larger, more universal story.

Those intersections between the private and the public were what I was looking for when I started to write my first book, in Iran, on Vladimir Nabokov. I wanted to discuss Nabokov's novels in light of the different times I had read them. That was impossible, not just because I could not frankly write about the political and social realities of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran but also because personal and private experiences were treated by the state as taboo.

It was around this time that I started making a list in my diary entitled "Things I Have Been Silent About." Under it I wrote: "Falling in Love in Tehran. Going to Parties in Tehran. Watching the Marx Brothers in Tehran. Reading *Lolita* in Tehran." I wrote about repressive laws and executions, about public and political abominations. Eventually I drifted into writing about private betrayals, implicating myself and those close to me in ways I had never imagined.

There are so many different forms of silence: the silence that tyrannical states force on their citizens, stealing their memories, rewriting their histories, and imposing on them a state-sanctioned identity. Or the silence of witnesses who choose to ignore or not speak the truth, and of victims who at times become complicit in the crimes committed against them. Then there are the silences we indulge in about ourselves, our personal mythologies, the stories we impose upon our real lives. Long before I came to appreciate how a ruthless political regime imposes its own image on its citizens, stealing their identities and self-definitions, I had experienced such impositions in my personal life—my life within my family. And long before I understood what it meant for a victim to become complicit in crimes of the state, I had discovered, in far more personal terms, the shame of complicity. In a sense, this book is a response to my own inner censor and inquisitor.

Perhaps the most common of all narratives is one about absent parents and the urgent need to fill in the void created by their deaths. The process does not lead to closure—at least not for me—but to understanding. It is an understanding that does not necessarily bring with it peace but perhaps a sense that this narrative might be the only way through which we can acknowledge our parents and in some form bring them back to life, now that we are free, at last, to shape the boundaries of our own story.

PART ONE | FAMILY FICTIONS

*A dim capacity for wings  
Degrades the dress I wear.*

—EMILY DICKINSON,  
*"From the Chrysalis"*



I HAVE OFTEN ASKED MYSELF how much of my mother's account of her meeting with her first husband was a figment of her imagination. If not for the photographs, I would have doubted that he had ever existed. A friend once talked of my mother's "admirable resistance to the unwanted," and since, for her, so much in life was unwanted, she invented stories about herself that she came to believe with such conviction that we started doubting our own certainties.

In her mind their courtship began with a dance. It seemed more likely to me that her parents would have asked her father for her hand, a marriage of convenience between two prominent families, as had been the convention in Tehran in the 1940s. But over the years she never changed this story, the way she did so many of her other accounts. She had met him at her uncle's wedding. She was careful to mention that in the morning she wore a flowery crêpe-de-chine dress and in the evening one made of duchess satin, and they danced all evening ("After my father had left," she would say, and then immediately add, "because no one dared dance with me in my father's presence"). The next day he asked for her hand in marriage.

Saifi! I cannot remember ever hearing his last name spoken in our house. We should have called him—with the echo of proper distance—Mother's first husband, or perhaps by his full title, Saif ol Molk Bayat, but to me he was always Saifi, good-naturedly part of our routine. He insinuated himself into our lives with the same ease with which he stood behind her in their wedding pictures, appearing unexpectedly and slyly whirling her away from us. I have two photos from that day—more than we ever had of my own parents' wedding. Saifi appears relaxed and affable, with his light hair and hazel eyes, while my mother, who is in the middle of the group, stands frozen like a solitary centerpiece. He seems nonchalantly confidently happy. But perhaps I am wrong and what I see on his face is not hope but utter hopelessness. Because he too has his secrets.



*Mother's first wedding, to Saifi.*

There was something about her story that always bothered me, even as a child. It seemed not so much untrue as wrong. Most people have a way of radiating their potential, not just what they are but what they could become. I wouldn't say my mother didn't have the potential to dance. It is worse than that. She wouldn't dance, even though, by all accounts, she was a good dancer. Dancing would have implied pleasure, and she took great pride in denying herself pleasure or any such indulgences.

All through my childhood and youth, and even now in this city so far removed from the Tehran that I remember, the shadow of that other ghostly woman who danced and smiled and loved disturbs the memories of the one I knew as my mother. I have a feeling that somehow I could understand just when she stopped dancing—when she stopped wanting to dance—I would find the key to my mother's riddle and finally make my peace with her. For I resisted my mother—if you believe her stories—almost from the start.

I HAVE THREE PHOTOGRAPHS of my mother and Saifi. Two are of their wedding, but I am interested in the third, a much smaller picture of them out on a picnic, sitting on a rock. They are both looking into the camera, smiling. She is holding onto him in the casual manner of people who are intimate and do not need to hold onto one another too tightly. Their bodies seem to naturally gravitate together. Looking at the photograph, I can see the possibility of the young, perhaps not yet frigid, woman letting go.



*Mother and Saifi. on a picnic.*

I find in the photograph the sensuality that we always missed in my mother in real life. When? I would say, when did you graduate from high school? How many years later did you marry Saifi? What did he do? When did you meet Father? Simple questions that she never really answered. She was too immersed in her own inner world to be bothered by such details. No matter what I asked her, she would tell me the same stock stories, which I knew almost by heart. Later, when I left Iran, I asked one of my students to interview her and gave specific questions to ask, but I got back the same stories.

No dates, no concrete facts, nothing that went outside my mother's set script.

A few years ago, at a family gathering, I ran into a lovely Austrian lady, the wife of a distant relative, who had been present at my mother's wedding to Saifi. One reason she remembered the wedding so clearly was the panic and confusion caused by the mysterious disappearance of the bride's birth certificate. (In Iran, marriages and children are recorded on birth certificates.) She told me, with the twinkle of a smile, that it was later discovered that the bride was a few years older than the groom. Mother's most recent birth certificate makes no mention of her first marriage. According to this document, which replaced the one she claimed to have lost, she was born in 1920. But she maintained that she was really born in 1924 and that her father had added four years to her age because he wanted to send her to school early. My father told us that my mother had actually subtracted four years from her



real age when she picked up the new birth certificate, which she needed so that she could apply for a driver's license. When the facts did not suit her, my mother would go to great lengths to refashion them altogether.

Some facts are on record. Her father-in-law, Saham Soltan Bayat, was a wealthy landowner who had seen one royal dynasty, the Qajars (1794–1925), replaced by another, the Pahlavis (1925–79). He managed to survive, even thrive, through the change in power. Mother sometimes boasted that she was related to Saifi on her mother's side and that they were both descendants of Qajar kings. During the fifties and sixties when I was growing up, being related to the Qajars, who, according to the official history books, represented the old absolutist system, was no feather in anyone's cap. My father would remind us mischievously that all Iranians were in one way or another related to the Qajars. In fact, he would say that those who could not find any connections to the Qajars were the truly privileged. The Qajars had reigned over the country for 131 years, and had numerous wives and offspring. Like the kings that came before them, they seemed to have picked their wives from all ranks and classes, possessing whoever caught their fancy: princesses, gardeners' daughters, poor village girls, all were part of their collection. One Qajar king, Fath Ali Shah (1771–1834), is said to have had 160 wives. Being of a judicious mindset, Father would usually add that of course that was only part of the story, and since history is written by the victors, especially in our country, we should take all that is said about the Qajars with a grain of salt—after all, it was during their reign that Iran started to modernize. They had lost, so anything could be said about them. Even as a child I sensed that Mother brought up this connection to the Qajars more to slight her present life with Father than to boast about the past. Her snobbism was arbitrary and her prejudices were restricted to the rules and laws of her own personal kingdom.

Saham Soltan, mother's father-in-law, appears in various history books and political memoirs—one line here, a paragraph there—once as deputy and vice president of Parliament, twice as minister of finance in the early 1940s, and as prime minister for a few months, from November 1944 to April 1945—during the time my mother claims to have been married to Saifi. Despite the fact that Iran had declared neutrality in World War II, Reza Shah Pahlavi had made the mistake of sympathizing with the Germans. The Allies, the British and the Soviets in particular, who had an eye on the geopolitical gains, occupied Iran in 1941, forced Reza Shah to abdicate, exiled him to Johannesburg, and replaced him with his young and more malleable son, Mohammad Reza. The Second World War triggered such upheaval in Iran that between 1943 and 1944 four prime ministers and seven ministers of finance were elected.

Mother knew little and seemed to care less about what kind of prime minister her father-in-law had been. What was important was that he played the fairy godfather to her degraded present. This is how so many public figures entered my life, not through history books but through my parents' stories

**H**OW GLAMOROUS MOTHER'S LIFE with Saifi really was is open to debate. They lived at Saham Soltan's house, in the chink of time between the death of his first wife and his marriage to a much younger and, according to my mother, quite detestable woman. In the absence of a lac

of the house, my mother did the honors. “Everybody’s eyes were on me that first night,” she would tell us, describing in elaborate detail the dress she had worn and the impact of her flawless French. As a child I would picture her coming down the stairs in her red chiffon dress, her black eyes shining, her hair immaculately done.

“The first night Doctor Millspaugh came ... you should have been there!” Dr. Millspaugh, the head of the American Mission in the 1940s, had been assigned by both the Roosevelt and the Truman administrations to help Tehran set up modern financial institutions. Mother never saw any reason to tell us who this man was, and for a long time, for some reason I was convinced that he was Belgian. Later, when I reviewed my mother’s accounts of these dinners, I was struck by the fact that Saifi was never present. His father would always be there, and Dr. Millspaugh or some other publicly important and personally insignificant character. But where was Saifi? That was the tragedy of her life: the man at her side was never the one she wanted.

My father, to bribe my brother and me into silence against my mother’s impositions, and perhaps to compensate for his own compliance, would tell us over and over again how she was imprisoned in her father-in-law’s house, where Khoji, the domineering housekeeper, was the real woman in charge. Even the key to the larder was in the hands of the indomitable Khoji, whom mother had to flatter and cajole to get as much as a length of fabric to make herself a nice dress. Father would remind us that she was treated more like an unwanted guest than as mistress of her father-in-law’s house.

Mother presented herself as a happy young bride, the proud heroine wooed by Prince Charming, and Father painted her as a victim of other people’s petty cruelties. They both wanted us to confirm their own version. Mother flung the past at us as an accusation of the present, and Father needed to justify her tyrannies on all of us, by provoking our compassion. It was difficult to compete with Saifi, a dead man, and a handsome one at that—the son of the prime minister, with the potential to become whatever she could imagine him to be. Mother’s father’s intelligence and goodwill, his future prospects and ambitions as a promising director at the Ministry of Finance, even the fact that he and my mother came from different branches of the same family, appeared poor seconds to what Mother believed Saifi had to offer her. Later she seemed to begrudge Father’s successes in public life, as if they were fierce rivals rather than partners.

The problem was not what she said but what she left out. My father filled in the gaps: Saifi, the favorite first son, had an incurable disease—nephritis of the kidney, they called it—and the doctors had given up on him. Let him do whatever he wants in these last years of his life, one had recommended. Indulge him, let him have his way. Provide him with all the fun he desires, because he has so little time to enjoy life. When his family proposed to my mother, they conveniently neglected to tell her that he was ill. She discovered it on her wedding night. According to my father their marriage was never consummated. Instead, for two years she nursed a sick husband, watching him die every day. And this was the romance of her life—the man whom she brandished to remind us of our own inadequacies!



*Mother.*

Sometimes, when she went on and on about Saifi with that absent look of hers, I wanted to shake her and say, No, that's not the way it was! But of course I never did. Did he care what would happen to her when she discovered his condition, or what would become of her after he died? She was too proud and too stubborn to have much interest in the truth. And so she transformed a real place and history into a fantasy of her own creation. Ever since I can remember, my brother, my father, and I tried to figure out what it was exactly that she wanted from us. We tried to travel with her to that other place that seemed to beckon, to which her eyes were constantly diverted as she gazed beyond the walls of her real home. What frightened me was not her rages but that frozen place in her that we could never penetrate. While she was alive I was too busy evading her and resenting her to understand how disappointed and alone she must have felt, how she was like so many other women about whom her best friend, Mina, used to say, with an ironic smile: "Another intelligent woman gone to waste."

MOTHER OFTEN SAID THAT I resisted her from the moment I was born. Apparently right at birth I coughed up blood and was given up for dead. She liked to tell the story of how in my infancy I refused to nurse and later declined to eat, giving in only under threat of the doctor's needles, or a dreaded colonel friend's sword. She wouldn't let me eat cucumbers, for some reason, or nuts. Once she gave me so much cod-liver oil that I broke out in hives. When my brother and I were sick with scarlet fever we were confined to a darkened room for forty days, because she believed light caused blindness in children with scarlet fever. Later, as an adult, I would sometimes tell the story of how she fed me so much grape juice one morning that I threw up. I wouldn't touch grapes for almost thirty years, until one night at a friend's house, when I dropped two on a whim into my wineglass and discovered the pleasure of crushing them with my teeth.

We often quarreled about my toys, which were usually locked in a closet. She always chose my toys and every once in a while I would be allowed to play with them briefly, before having to put them back. There was a small doll who crawled on all fours and a rabbit I was particularly fond of that her friend Monir joon had brought back from Paris. It played drums and was white and fluffy, but because of the drums it couldn't be properly cuddled. How I adored the soft white fur of that inaccessible rabbit! Long after I left home my mother continued to add to the doll collection, which she claimed would someday be mine. When she died, no one could find the dolls. They were gone, along with her rare antique carpets, two trunks of silver, her gold coins, the china from her first marriage, and most of her jewelry. The first time I was allowed to play with one of my favorite dolls, a blue-eyed porcelain number with long blond hair and a turquoise dress, I threw her up in the air and caught her again and again until she fell to the ground, her face smashed into fragments. Over the years I will lose or destroy objects that are dearest to me, especially those given to me by my mother. Rings and earrings, antique lamps, figurines—I can see them all clearly. The loss of these objects, what does it mean? Was I just that way, the kind of careless person who loses people and things?



I can trace our first real battle of wills to when I was about four years old. This particular fight was over the location of my bed. I wanted it near the window—I loved that window with its large ledge where I could arrange my dolls and my toy china set. Mother wanted it by the wall, next to the closet. And every time she conceded, in a day or two she would revert to her original plan. One evening, when I came home from playing with the Armenian neighbors' daughter—a shy four-year-old from whom I was inseparable—my mother had moved my bed back to the wall. I cried and cried and cried that night and refused to eat my dinner. Any other night she would have forced me to eat, but that night she made an exception and I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning I wake up on the detested far side of the room, filled with tearful resentment. Father comes to my bedside, smiling.

My father and I had begun to develop a routine: every night he would tell me a bedtime story. But this particular morning he offers me a special treat. He says—as he places on the bedside table a small china plate which he had filled with chocolates—that if I am a good girl and give him the biggest smile I can muster he will tell me a secret. What secret? He cannot divulge secrets to unhappy girls with big frowns. But I am obstinate and refuse to comply; he has to tell me the secret without getting anything in return. Okay then, he says, but I bet you will smile when you hear my plan.

Let's do something new, he says conspiratorially Let's make up our own stories. What stories? I ask. Our own stories; we can make up anything we want. I don't know how to do that, I say. Yes you do, think of what you want most, and then make up a story about it. What do you want most right now? I say, Nothing. He says, Perhaps right now you want to have your bed back by the window, but do you know what your bed wants? I shrug my shoulders. He says, Why don't we make up a story about a little girl and her bed... Have you ever heard of a talking bed?



*Me when I was five years old.*

And that was how a new ritual was created: from that day on, my father and I developed a secret language. We made up stories to communicate our feelings and demands, and built our own world. Sometimes the stories we made up were very mundane. Whenever I did something he disapproved of, he would convey his disapproval in a story form, saying, for example, “There was a man who loved his daughter so much, but he was so hurt when she promised him she would not fight with the nanny ...” In time we developed other secret means of communication: whenever I did something wrong in company, Father would put his index finger to his nose as a sign of warning. If I wanted to remember an important task, I should strike my nose with my finger seven consecutive times, each time repeating what I had to do, a device I use to this day. In this secret world my mother had no role. This is how we took our revenge on her tyrannies. I would learn, over time, that I could always take refuge in my make-believe world, one in which I could not only move the bed over by the window, but fly with it out the window to a place where no one, not even my mother, could enter, much less control.

IN THE EARLY NINETIES, my father published three children’s books based on classic texts. One of these was a version of the *Shah-nameh*, known in English as *The Book of Kings*, written by the epic poet Ferdowsi. In the introduction to his book, my father explains that he first told these stories to us, his children, when we were about three or four years old, and that he continued his tutelage by acquainting us with other great classic Persian masterpieces: Rumi’s *Masnavi*, Saadi’s *Golestan* and *Boostan*, and *Kelileh va Demneh*. He writes that later we continued to read

them on our own. What he emphasizes in this introduction is that Iranians of his day should learn more about their ancestors and their values through a careful reading of the *Shahnameh*. He says he is happy that through such a medium “Iran is seen, heard and felt in our houses today and it warms our hearts ...”

My father’s voice would take on a reverential tone whenever he spoke about Ferdowsi. He taught us that poets demand a special kind of respect, different from the respect we owe our teachers or our elders. Once, when I was very young, perhaps around four, I asked my father to tell me more stories by this Mr. Ferdowsi. Not Mr., he corrected me. He is Ferdowsi the Poet. And for a long time after that I asked to hear stories by the Poet Ferdowsi. My first notion of Iran was formed by my father’s tales from the *Shahnameh*.

Ever since I can remember, my parents and their friends spoke of Iran as a beloved but prodigal child whose welfare they constantly quarreled about. Over the years Iran acquired for me a paradoxical identity: it was a concrete place, defined by where I was born and lived, the language I spoke, the food I ate, and at the same time it was a mythical notion encouraging all manner of virtues and values, a symbol of resistance and of betrayal.

For my mother there was no other country. She sometimes spoke of other places to which she had traveled. She admired them, but Iran was her home. Whereas my father constantly wrangled and struggled with what it meant to be an Iranian, Mother had no such problems. Certain things were immutable for her. Being Iranian seemed to come with her genes—like her beautiful dark eyes, so dark that they appeared black, or the light olive color of her skin. She criticized Iranians the same way she disapproved of certain members of her clan, but she never related what she perceived as their shortcomings to Iran.

Mother respected Ferdowsi, as any Iranian would, but she scorned our preoccupation with literature, considering it a waste of time. Later I found a more colorful explanation for her hostility to fiction makers: it occurred to me that she did not want rivals. She had created her own world and her own mythology and had no need for others who made a living of such things.

WHEN I THINK OF MY FATHER, the first thing that comes to mind is his voice. In different places, walking the streets, sitting in the garden, driving the car, and at bedtime, I can still experience the calm that came over me whenever he would tell a story. I paid attention to these stories and internalized them in a way I never did with real life experiences. Later my father broke my heart, and because I loved him and trusted him as I loved and trusted no one else, I also hurt him and broke his heart. What partly exonerates him now in my mind is his stories. Only those shared moments have remained untainted by our mutual plunderings and betrayals.

While I feared my mother’s cold outbursts and her persistent demands, I was deeply and constantly afraid of losing my father. I remember so many nights sitting by the window waiting for him to come home, listening for his footsteps in the hall before I could finally sleep. In time I became his most faithful ally and apologist. I felt that he, like me, was a victim of my mother’s tyranny and thus exempt from blame. She resented our shared sympathy and every once in a while burst out in fits of anger. “You, you are made of the same rotten genes as your father,” she told my brother and me in her moments of rage. “You

are all waiting for me to die so you will get my inheritance.” I sometimes wondered if she might not after all be right: Was I not made of those same rotten genes?

If Mother commanded and demanded, my father lured and seduced much like Tom Sawyer enticing his playmates to paint his fence. My relationship with him always had the intimacy of a shared secret, whether we were walking the streets as I listened to his stories, or planning how to please or appease my mother. My father and I were bound by our secret world, and by the intimacy created by our shared moments of storytelling, which simultaneously freed me from the reality around me and transported me to a new reality composed of teasing figments shaped by his voice.

On Friday mornings, Father would wake me up early and take me for a long walk. To stem my complaints about the length of these walks, he bought me a special cup that we would fill up from a favorite fountain along the way. He called this our special time, when he would tell stories, and occasionally stop to buy ice cream. With time the characters in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* became as familiar to me as my own family. I could not imagine life without them, and the book itself became a place I loved to visit, knowing that I could knock on the door at all hours of day or night and roam around without restrictions or inhibitions. Later it became a habit, one that I have kept to this day, to open it at random and read a story here or there. I never studied the *Shahnameh* properly, and never thought of writing anything scholarly about it, perhaps because I wanted to preserve the sense of wonder that came over me when I first heard my father tell its stories.

Over a thousand years ago Ferdowsi composed a mythical tale of Iran, partly woven out of snatches of history. His epic spanned from the creation of the world up to the Arab conquest in the seventh century, a most humiliating defeat that marked the end of the ancient Persian Empire and the shift of our religion from Zoroastrianism to Islam. Ferdowsi's aim was to rekindle his countrymen's pride in their past, and to restore their sense of dignity and heritage. Father kept reminding my brother and me that the history of our country was fraught with wars and conquests—the Persians fought with the Greeks, Romans, Arab Mongols—and, later, after the Islamic Revolution, he said we faced the worst conquerors of all because they were enemies from within, who nonetheless treated Iranian citizens like conquered subjects.

The Arabs were pervasive conquerors. The legend was that they insisted on an almost perfect annihilation of Persian culture, especially the written word. Fed up with the decades of rule of the Sassanid kings and their powerful priests—the last Sassanid king, Yazdegerd II was murdered in 651 by a mill owner at whose home he had taken refuge—many Persians turned to embrace those whom they considered wild barbarians. I remember, as a child, hearing stories about how the Arab caliph Omar ordered his soldiers to burn all the books they found in Iran since the only book people would need was the Koran. My father taught me that much of Iranian nationalism was based on anti-Arab sentiment. He said, We Iranians are too worried about our good image and want to appear blameless in the eyes of the world. So many of us blame the Arabs. Few question our own role in our defeat. After all, who opened the gates of the kingdom to those barbarians, who facilitated their conquest?

In his epic poem Ferdowsi sought to conserve and interrogate an irretrievable past, both celebrating and mourning the passing of a great civilization. He brought the old Persia\* back



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