



PENGUIN  
CANADA



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AFTER  
TEHRAN



*Prisoner of Tehran*

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Marina

Nemat

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**AFTER  
TEHRAN**

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A LIFE  
RECLAIMED  
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*To Shahnoosh Behzadi  
and Neda Agha-Soltan*

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## *Author's Note*

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Although this is a work of non-fiction, I have changed names and some details to protect the identity and privacy of individuals.



*Nineteen years after leaving Iran, I began to have recurring dreams about putting different items in a suitcase to take to the next world with me. I was getting ready for death.*

*In my waking life, I knew that I would like to wear a red dress to the grave and to keep my wedding ring on.*

*This book tells the story of every one of those dream items. Each object (sometimes paired with another) stands as the title of a chapter.*

*There are other things I would have liked to take to the next world with me. But during moments of anger, frustration, madness, or surprising sanity, I have given them away, thrown them out, or buried them.*



My Grandmother's Silver Jewellery Box

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## My Grandmother's Silver Jewellery Box



“Look what you’ve done now! You’ve killed your mother!” my father said to me in Persian as paramedics carried my mother on a stretcher down the narrow flight of stairs in my suburban Toronto house on a cloudy day in October 1998. Standing in the tiny foyer with the front door wide open, I shivered in the cold wind that held the scent of winter, relieved that the paramedics didn’t speak our language. But one of them looked at me with questioning eyes, and I guessed that he had felt the anger in my father’s voice, as cutting as broken glass. My father was trying to place blame, as if finding a person responsible for my mother’s sudden illness would fix things and make her well.

The paramedics rushed my mother past me, and I caught a glimpse of her face. It was paler than usual, and the lines around her brown eyes seemed deeper. But there was more: her eyes were different; they were not as stern and condemning as they had always been. She looked like a defiant child who had been caught red-handed but didn’t regret what she had done, not even for a moment. I followed the paramedics and my parents out the door, and tears rolled down my face. I wiped them away with the back of my hand. I was stronger than this. Yet here I was, a thirty-three-year-old woman feeling as if I were eight again and back in Tehran.

I watched the lights of the ambulance disappear around the corner. Then I went back into the house. My husband, Andre, and I had bought it in July 1993, two years after our arrival in Canada as landed immigrants. My parents had joined us in the fall of that year. The top half of the wall next to the stairs was painted yellow, the bottom half a pistachio green, and a wide border of blue and white flowers separated the two. I had wanted to paint that wall as soon as we moved into the house, but because I was working part-time at McDonald’s and then Swiss Chalet in addition to being the mother of two young boys, I didn’t get to it for a while.

I locked the door behind me and, unable to carry my weight any longer, sat on the floor in front of it. I was grateful that no one was home; my children were at school and Andre was at work. I knew I had to call him, ask him to pick up the kids and come home so we could go to the hospital and find out what had happened to my mother. But I couldn’t move.

*“Look what you’ve done now! You’ve killed your mother!”*

Was my father finally reacting to what had happened in Tehran sixteen years earlier? In 1982, at the age of sixteen, I was arrested for so-called political crimes, then locked up in the notorious Evin prison. I knew my incarceration had taken its toll on my parents. But it had taken its toll on me, too. I hadn’t thought about Evin in years. My past was a ghost that I, like my family, had chosen to ignore even though its presence was undeniable. I had never talked to my parents about what happened to me in prison, because not only did they never ask me, they also made it clear they wanted the experience forgotten. Immediately after my release, I didn’t *want* to talk about my imprisonment, but I would have felt reassured to know they would be willing to listen when I was ready. Now my mother was dying, and my parents still had no idea what had gone on behind the walls of Evin. How could I tell them that I had been tortured and had come close to execution? How could I describe being forced to marry one of my interrogators and spending nights with him in a solitary cell? And there was more—much more—

The phone began to ring, but I didn't dare answer it. What if my mother had died? What if my father was right and I *had* killed her?

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I soon learned that I had not caused my mother to have a heart attack. She had gallbladder cancer and had to undergo surgery. My mother had known about her cancer for a while but had not said a word to any of us. When later we asked her why she hadn't told us, she said she hadn't wanted us to worry.

My parents and I had never communicated, never gotten along. As a punishment when I was a child, my mother sometimes locked me out on the balcony of our apartment in downtown Tehran. We rented two connecting apartments above a small restaurant and a furniture store on the northwest corner of Shah and Rahzi avenues. Our three bedrooms, small kitchen, and bathroom lay on either side of a dark, narrow hallway between my mother's beauty salon and my father's dance studio.

I can clearly remember why my mother locked me out on the balcony the first time. It was shortly after the death of my paternal grandmother, Xena, and I was seven years old. My grandmother Xena—or *Bahboo*, as I called her—lived with us and ran the household, cooking and cleaning and caring for me. She took me to the park every day and read to me. She was my best friend. I hardly ever saw my mother. She worked in her beauty salon all day and usually went out at night. *Bahboo*, like my mother's mother, was of Russian descent and Christian. My Russian grandmothers had married Iranian men who had gone to Russia for work before the Communist revolution of 1917. After the revolution, both families had to leave the country; the men were not Russian citizens, and foreigners were no longer allowed to remain there.

Xena and Esah, my grandfather, left Russia for Iran when Xena was pregnant with my father, and my father's only sibling, Tamara, was four. My father was born in the city of Mashad in 1921, shortly after the family's arrival in Iran; soon after his birth, they moved to Tehran. Only weeks later, Esah, a jeweller, went out to sell the jewellery he had brought with him from Russia to buy a house for his family—but he was murdered, and everything he had with him was stolen. Xena, who didn't speak Persian and was a stranger in Iran, managed to survive. She eventually opened a boarding house and provided a decent living for her two children. She never married again.

Esah had given Xena a silver jewellery box. After his death, she used the box to store sugar and kept it on the kitchen table. Every time she sweetened her tea, she was reminded of him. I loved the box, and after her death, I wanted it to be only mine, so one day I dumped all the sugar onto the kitchen table and hid the box under my bed. My mother soon discovered who had made that mess, and she locked me out on the balcony to punish me. Of course, this would not be my last time there. I was a curious, opinionated, and articulate child who wanted to know everything and never took no for an answer. "No" always set up an intriguing challenge for me, and I always responded to it with "Why?" My mother, who was beautiful, busy, and short-tempered and was going through a difficult menopause, simply didn't have patience, so she came up with the perfect punishment to keep me out of her way: locking me out on the balcony. My brother wasn't around to help. Alik, my only sibling, was fourteen years older than I was. He had left home at the age of eighteen to go to university in another city.

I hated the balcony. It was either too hot or too cold, and, worst of all, it was lonely. However, that was where I learned patience, a virtue that didn't come naturally to me. One thing I hated even more than being locked away was being humiliated, so I never made a scene; I never screamed, banged on the balcony door, or stomped my feet. I cried silently and watched the street below from above through the bamboo shades encircling my eight-by-four-foot roofless cell.

The paved four-lane street seethed with traffic during rush hours and the air smelled of exhaust fumes. Across the street, Hassan *Agha*, the vendor who had only one arm, sold sour green plums

spring, peaches and apricots in summer, cooked red beets in autumn, and different kinds of cookies in winter. ~~At one corner of the intersection, an old blind man held out his bony hands to passersby and cried, "Help me, for the love of God!" from morning till night.~~ Opposite our apartment, the large mirrored windows of a fifteen-storey office building sparkled in the sun and reflected the movement of the clouds. At night, the neon lights above the stores came on and coloured the darkness.

My sentence on the balcony would last from half an hour to several hours. For most of this time I could hear a waltz or a tango through the windows of my father's dance studio, and sometimes I heard my father counting. "One, two, three ... one, two, three ..." In my mind, I could see my father and his students, elegantly dressed couples, spin and glide to the music, and I wished I could be a part of that forbidden world of the studio. But my father never let me in when he was working. Often when I awoke very early in the morning and everyone was still asleep, I would go into the studio and swirl to an imaginary waltz until I became dizzy and collapsed on the cool brown linoleum floor that smelled of wax.

As a child, I was afraid of my father. I would watch him while he sat on his favourite black leather chair in the waiting area of his studio every evening, reading the paper. His posture was always perfect—as straight as a ruler. If I disturbed him by saying something or making a sound, he would look at me with his serious amber eyes, his mouth an unbending line that seemed incapable of ever breaking into a smile. He, too, had no patience for young children. I knew quite well that if I misbehaved, he would slap me on the face, which was the most humiliating thing I could experience.

This was how I grew up, an outsider, observing my family from a distance, as if a brick wall that became thicker with each passing day stood between us. I found refuge in books, school, and friends, and I spent most of my time reading and studying. Having always been one of the top students in my class, I decided when I was twelve to become a doctor. All my teachers encouraged me, telling me that with my perseverance, I could become whatever I set my mind to. Meanwhile, in other ways my life resembled that of an average North American girl. Every Thursday night, I watched *Little House on the Prairie* (dubbed into Persian), and every Friday, I watched *Donny & Marie* (in English). At the age of twelve I was madly in love with Donny Osmond! We owned a cottage by the Caspian Sea; there I spent my summers riding my bike, sunbathing on the beach, partying with friends, or dancing to the tunes of the Bee Gees.

The Islamic Revolution succeeded when I was thirteen and changed my world beyond recognition. From my window, I watched the gathering storm. It was a drizzle at first, but then it turned into a flash flood, engulfing the streets, washing away the normalcy of our lives. Our street, which had always been congested with cars and crowded with pedestrians who strolled or rushed along or haggled with vendors, was empty and silent. Even the beggars were gone. Soon, military trucks shadowed every corner. Once every few days, hundreds of angry demonstrators filled the street, bearded men leading the way and women wearing *chadors*\* following them; with their fists raised in the air, they screamed "Down with the shah!" and "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic!" For the first time in my life I heard gunshots; the military had opened fire on the demonstrating crowds. My mother ordered me to stay away from windows, and now I obeyed her without an argument.

Even though the revolution was gaining momentum, my parents believed that a bunch of mullahs and unarmed civilians would never defeat the shah's military. But they were wrong. The shah went into exile; Ayatollah Khomeini, who had been in exile for years, returned to Iran; the Islamic Republic of Iran was born, and with it, our world and all the rules that had held it together collapsed. The people of Iran wanted democracy, but that is not what they got. Soon, dancing was declared satanic. My father closed down his studio and began working as an office clerk at a friend's stainless-steel factory. He hated his new job but was hopeful that the new Islamic government would not last very long.

Makeup, pretty clothes, and Western books became illegal. Before I knew it, my dream of becoming a doctor slipped away, because fanatic young women of the Revolutionary Guard, most of whom didn't even have a high-school diploma, gradually replaced our teachers. These unqualified new teachers spent most of the class time spouting political rhetoric. When I protested to the new calculus teacher and asked her to teach calculus instead of enumerating all the great things Khomeini had done for the country, she told me to leave the classroom if I didn't like the new order. I left and unintentionally began a school-wide strike that went on for three days.

During the next few months, I started a school newspaper and wrote articles against the government. Our new principal, who was about nineteen years old and a member of the Revolutionary Guard, came to know me as one of her worst enemies. Most of my friends were now supporters of anti-government Marxist or Marxist-Islamist political groups, and I tried very hard to fit in with them. But even though I hated the new government, I was a devout Christian who attended Mass every day, so I soon found myself isolated and depressed. My parents were aware of most of my activities, but they never tried to stop me; after all, by normal standards, I wasn't doing anything wrong. All I wanted was to study math, science, and literature instead of government propaganda. Finally, the principal gave my name and the names of many other "anti-revolutionary" students from our school to the Courts of Islamic Justice.

I was arrested at about nine o'clock at night on January 15, 1982, just sixteen years old. My imprisonment lasted two years. During that time, my mother and father suffered a great deal. They knew that political prisoners were tortured in Evin. They had heard about the rape of young girls and the daily mass executions. Every day, they waited for the phone call that would tell them to go to the prison gates to collect my belongings because I had been executed.

Evin was a country within a country. It had its own unwritten rules, and in a way, it had its own government and army. Its guards and interrogators had extreme powers. Evin prisoners were stripped of every right and were considered less than slaves. Most prisoners were allowed regular visits with close family members, so I saw my parents for five to ten minutes once a month. A thick glass barrier divided the large visiting room in half. For the first few months of my time in Evin there were no phones in the visiting room, so we couldn't talk and used a sign language instead. Armed members of the Revolutionary Guard stood in every corner and monitored our every move. My parents cried constantly, and I tried to smile and assure them I was all right. At one of the visits about six months after my arrest, I told them I had converted to Islam. They didn't ask why. They knew I had been forced to. No one dared question what went on in Evin.

When I was released after two years, two months, and twelve days, my parents behaved as if I had been away on an extended holiday. The first night I was home, we all sat around the dinner table, and I listened with astonishment as my parents talked about the weather. I almost felt locked out on the balcony again. It took me a few days to understand their behaviour. I finally decided that their silence was their way of protecting themselves as well as me; they didn't want to know about the pain and horror of my time in prison, so they pretended it never happened, hoping we would all forget it. But I did not forget anything. I pushed my memories into a dark corner of my mind, where they would remain dormant for many years. I became a prisoner of silence.

After my release in 1984, for about six years the government of Iran refused to give me a passport. Finally, they agreed to let me leave the country, but only if I guaranteed my return and put down five hundred thousand *tomans*—about thirty-five hundred U.S. dollars—as a deposit. If I returned within a year, the money would be refunded. If not, it would go to the government. At the time, Andre's salary was seven thousand *tomans* a month—about sixty U.S. dollars. We didn't have enough money, and it took us a while to gather it. Once we did, the government let us go. However, since I did not return

Iran after the year was up, there was the chance the Revolutionary Guard would decide to arrest my parents to punish me. After all that had happened in Iran, I couldn't rest until my mother and father were safely in Canada. So, shortly after our arrival in Toronto in August 1991, I asked my brother Alik, to sponsor my parents. He had immigrated to Canada in 1979. Andre and I would have sponsored my parents ourselves, but legally, we couldn't until we were Canadian citizens—a process we knew would take more than three years.

My mother passed away from cancer in March 2000, before I was able to tell her my secrets. But the past had come back to life and there was no escaping it. It had built up like a volcano for sixteen years and an eruption was imminent. When members of the Revolutionary Guard had come to my house to arrest me and pointed guns at my face, I had felt nothing. It was as if I had left my body and was watching a movie. At that terrible moment, I entered a never-ending state of shock. Without realizing it, I'd lost the ability to feel anything deeply. Fear, love, anger, and hatred brushed my skin but never penetrated my flesh. This mechanism became my key to survival in a prison where ninety per cent of the thousands of prisoners were teenagers who had been dragged out of their warm beds and lashed on the soles of their feet until they were so badly swollen that they could not walk. The crimes of these children ranged from having read Western novels or works of Marx and Lenin or publications of illegal political groups, to having dressed the wrong way or having spoken against the values of the Islamic Revolution. Some had participated in protest rallies against the regime and some had distributed pamphlets of "anti-revolutionary" political groups. Evin was like high school in hell.

I HAD MY FIRST psychotic episode right after my mother's funeral in mid-March 2000.

Bundled up in our parkas, hats, and gloves, Andre, my father, my seven- and twelve-year-old sons Thomas and Michael, and I got into our gold Toyota Camry. Even the children were silent, somehow aware that all had to remain unsaid. Silence had become a member of my family; like a weed, it had crawled into all the spaces between us, its sap a thick, stubborn emulsion of secrets, pain, and anger. The car moved along grey streets under a grey sky. Spring still felt a world away, and people walked briskly with their backs hunched against the wind. I wondered if my mother was watching us, if God had told her about what happened to me in Evin and if she finally understood how lonely I had been. Would she embrace me now and murmur soothing words to take away some of my sadness?

A wave of guilt washed over me. How terribly selfish of me to think of myself on the day of her funeral.

Except, she was gone, and I still had to deal with this world. Should I ask God to forgive her? Had I forgiven her? Forgiven her for what? For a lonely and often terrifying childhood, for one thing. She sometimes threatened to leave me forever if I misbehaved. A few times she even pretended to go, grabbing her purse and rushing angrily down the stairs as I hung on to her skirt or her legs and begged her to stay. She never truly left, but every time she went to the grocery store or to run an errand, I stood by the window and cried until she returned, worried that I would never see her again. But I had forgiven her for that many years ago, I guess when I turned thirteen. By then, I had grown into an independent child who had come to understand that she had to rely on herself for survival. I had finally lost my fear of losing my mother. Did I blame her for not asking me about what had happened in Evin? No, I didn't exactly blame her, but the sadness and loneliness of carrying the burden of the past made me feel, in a way, that I was still in prison. All I wanted was for her to understand how I felt and know the truth. I didn't want her to feel sorry for me. I didn't feel sorry for myself. It would simply have comforted me to know that she knew.

We stopped at the Loblaws at Yonge Street and Steeles Avenue to buy flowers. Pink and white gladiola. My mother's favourite colour was blue, but the store didn't have any blue flowers. A few

days before she died, during one of her rare moments of lucidity, she asked me to make sure that she would be buried in the purple dress she had worn to my wedding.

“I ask *you* because your father is too emotional right now, but you’re sensible and I know I can count on you,” she said to me.

*Sensible?*

I had always believed that if she had to find one adjective to describe me, it would be *stupid*. Cancer had changed my mother, as if, like her body, her soul had been affected. But the cancer wasn’t the only thing devastating her; it was also the morphine.

One day she awoke from her medicated sleep and looked around like a terrified, wounded animal.

“What is it, *Maman?*” I asked, jumping out of my chair, which was next to her bed.

“They’re coming to get me ... they’re here ... look, over there!” she said, pointing into the empty space in front of the door and then the window. But nobody was there.

She grabbed my hand with her cold bony fingers. Her skin was dry like desert sand. I remembered when she was young and healthy and beautiful, when her hands, warm and soft, always smelled like roses.

“Marina, tell me you can see them! Look! There!”

“Who do you see, *Maman?* If you tell me what they look like, I might be able to make them go away.”

When I was six, *Bahboo* had said the same thing to me to get me to talk about my nightmares, which used to make me shiver and cry without saying a word—and, very quietly, I whispered everything in *Bahboo*’s ear. If I spoke any louder, *they* might hear and punish me. I told *Bahboo* about the shadows walking around my room. I believed that I saw them when I awoke in the middle of the night. With their bodies covered in long black cloaks, they were tall and darker than the darkness surrounding us. They walked in a circle in a slow, steady pace. I couldn’t see their faces because they always bowed their heads. I knew that they were chanting, but it was as if their voices were made of darkness. I could almost see their song but couldn’t hear it; clearly, it was a well-protected secret that wasn’t made for my ears. After I told *Bahboo* about them, she looked at me thoughtfully, and then her amber eyes inspected my room. It was daytime and there were no dark shadows.

“Monks,” she said reassuringly, and smiled.

“Monks? Who are they? Are they bad? Will they hurt me? They’re scary!”

“Have you ever heard what they say?”

“No.”

“Have they ever hurt you?”

“No. They just walk around.”

“They will never hurt you.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“But how do you know? Do they walk around your room, too?”

“No, but I’ve had my own nightmares.”

“But I see them, *Bahboo*. They’re not a nightmare! They’re real!”

“I know. I know. I’ve had real nightmares, too. Trust me. *Bahboo* knows. What you have told me sounds exactly like monks. They’re good. They walk around and pray. Maybe they pray for you.”

“Really?”

“Who else can they be? If the Devil wanted to hurt you, do you think he would send such a useless bunch to walk around your room and do nothing? What’s the point of that?”

She was right. The Devil probably had very scary monsters. Much scarier than my monks. It felt good to know their name; “monk” was much better than “dark shadow.”

“So ... what should I do?” I asked.

“You should acknowledge them.”

“How?”

“Talk to them.”

“No way!”

“Why not?”

“They’re scary!”

“Scary? You told me they never hurt you.”

“Well ... I don’t know ... What should I say?”

“How about a Hail Mary?”

“Okay ... I’ll try.”

“You can’t run away from shadows and nightmares, Marina. You have to face them.”

I swallowed.

It took me a few nights, but I did whisper a Hail Mary to the shadows. My every word was a little more than a breath that crawled reluctantly out of my mouth through my trembling lips and helplessly floated into the night, disappearing in the black nightmare that lived in my room. The shadows stopped moving for a moment but soon resumed at the same pace as before. However, I heard something. Surprisingly strong, my own voice echoed back to me: “‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.’” As the prayer touched my face, my fear began to melt away. “Good night,” I said to the monks, then turned around and soon fell asleep. I was not afraid anymore. At least, not as much as before. *Bahboo* was right. They were just silly monks who had nothing better to do than walk around my room.

Now my mother was seeing shadows. We had switched positions: I was the adult and she was the child.

“*Maman*, if you tell me what you see, I’ll be able to help you,” I said.

“They’re coming for me. They want to take me away and lock me up. They will suck my blood.”

“Who?”

“*Pasdarah*.”

“*Maman*, there are no Revolutionary Guard here. What you see is from the past. We’re in Canada. It’s safe here.”

“But they’re here, Marina, and they want to take *me* this time!”

“I won’t let them take you, *Maman*.”

“But they’re here for *me*. I know it!”

“No, *Maman*. They’re here for me, and I will tell them that they have already had me, and they will go away.”

“Yes, you do that,” my mother said exhaustedly.

“Go away!” I said sharply. “You’ve already had me. Leave us alone!”

My mother was suddenly still. Was she breathing? I put my hand on her chest. Her rib cage rose slightly under my fingers. She was alive.

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This was the closest my mother and I ever came to talking about Evin.

Soon after this hallucination, she didn't recognize any of us. She was awake but dead. Her eyes were not the ones I had known all my life. They had turned into glass. Cold, fragile, and without nightmares or dreams. Her soul had left her body.

At the funeral home my children and I warmed ourselves by the fireplace, but at that moment, as if the fires of hell could not have stopped me from shivering. I reluctantly took off my coat. I wasn't wearing black garments but rather a beige sweater and a brown skirt, the nicest clothes I owned. When I was dressing to come to the funeral home, I realized that I didn't own any black outfits. "What kind of woman never wears black?" I asked myself. After the success of the revolution in Iran, they made women wear only dark colours. Was this why I hated black and avoided it, and was this why I had painted my living room an "interesting" shade of yellow, as Andre put it politely? Why was I thinking these stupid thoughts at my mother's funeral?

We had to climb a flight of stairs to get to the visiting room. My feet were already hurting in my high heels. Wearing pants and boots would have been so much more sensible. My father walked ahead of me. He was seventy-nine years old, but his posture was still perfect; he still had a dancer's elegance. His every movement was light, as if gravity didn't apply to him. As he extended his hand for people to shake, I could almost hear the waltzes and tangos of his dance studio in the background. How had he felt when the Islamic Republic of Iran took music away from him? What does a nation become without colour, music, poetry, and literature? What do we become when beauty turns into crime?

People were nodding, smiling, and looking sad. I knew a few of them, but most of them were Alik's friends I had never met. I felt guilty standing there, greeting strangers and accepting their condolences. They didn't know I was a terrible daughter who went to prison for two years at the age of sixteen and made her parents suffer. Were they wondering why I had not worn black? I saw a few of my own friends and sighed with relief. Even if they didn't know the details, they knew I had been in prison, and still they had chosen to come to the funeral.

My mother's flower-covered casket sat on the other side of the room. I knew that she was wearing her purple dress. She had looked great in it at my wedding. She never cried that day at the church the way some mothers do when their daughters get married. She had been angry with me for marrying Andre; she couldn't understand why I was doing something so illogical. However, she tearlessly played the role of the proud, happy mother, and I was grateful for that. I myself hadn't known why I was marrying Andre, but I was quite sure that I had to do it. It was as if I were starving and had to eat. Even though I returned to my church immediately after my release, the government of Iran still considered me a Muslim woman. Since a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a Christian man, by returning to the church and marrying Andre, I would be automatically condemned to death. Did I want to die? Was this why I married Andre? Or was marrying him an act of defiance, showing the world that even though the Islamic Republic had tried to destroy me and almost succeeded, I was still me?

From the cemetery, with family and friends, we went to Alik's house for lunch. Given the fourteen-year age gap between us, Alik and I had never been close. And we don't look alike: he is six-foot-seven and thin, with clear white skin, deep amber eyes, and a large nose; I'm five feet, with dark hair and dark eyes. The caterers had prepared a Persian meal of basmati rice and chicken and beef kebabs, but I wasn't hungry. People were eating and chatting. For dessert, there were cups of *sholezard*, a Persian rice pudding made with rosewater, saffron, and cinnamon. I took a pudding—I needed some sugar in my system—and sat next to my father.

The scent of cinnamon made me close my eyes and think of happiness. Was I happy with my life? I had survived Evin, married the man I loved—even if under strange circumstances—had two beautiful children, a nice house, and, altogether, a wonderful Canadian life. Was happiness supposed to be an intense emotion? When I thought of happiness, my memories carried me back to my childhood days by the Caspian Sea when I munched on cinnamon cookies on the beach, watching the sunset.

“Marina, your mother forgave you before she died,” my father suddenly announced.

“What?” I heard myself say.

“Yes, she forgave you.”

I stared at him and a strange feeling rushed from my stomach to my chest. It saturated my head and lungs in what felt like a thick, chalky liquid, and for a moment I thought I would vomit. But I didn't. Instead, to my own astonishment, I began to scream. I wasn't saying anything; I was just screaming. I had not screamed while being tortured. Not because I was resisting, but because every lash that landed on the bare soles of my feet somehow drained every ounce of my energy. Under torture, I couldn't breathe properly, as if I had forgotten how. The man who was beating me, Hameh, thought my silence was a sign of resistance and flogged me even harder. Why was I screaming now? I didn't know, but I couldn't stop. I expected to bleed from my eyes and nose and ears and my skin to rupture. Anger. An emotion I had not felt since I could remember.

My screams became so urgent I couldn't catch my breath. I ran to find air.

Faces around me were a blur of colours and lines that blended and moved, but sometimes a face came into focus and all I could absorb from it was a sense of shock and fear. I landed in the front yard still screaming. I needed someone to help me stop, but everyone was staring at me. I collapsed. A friend of mine who is a medical doctor bent over me. “You're okay,” she said. “Everything is okay. Look at me and breathe.” I gazed into her familiar brown eyes. I trusted her, had always trusted her. Her husband had been Andre's colleague in Iran, and she had been our family physician there. I concentrated on her voice.

I can't remember how I got home, but in the days that followed no one phoned to see how I was doing. No one asked why I had behaved the way I had. I guessed they assumed that I was upset because of my mother's death. Except, that kind of an outburst wasn't like me at all. What I had done was not normal in any way. *That* was not grief. Why didn't people ask me anything? Maybe they were doing the right thing. Maybe I had to continue doing what I had done for all those years and look ahead. I had a job, a family, a life, and I had to attend to them. So I tried to do just that. I kept on serving quarter-chicken dinners at the local Swiss Chalet where I worked, and I smiled at my customers and inquired if they wanted fries or salad with their meal. Then, every weekday after my lunch shift, I picked up my kids from school, went home, did laundry, and made dinner.

\* *Chador* is a cloaklike garment worn by some Iranian women in public and is only one way in which a Muslim woman can follow the Islamic dress code known as *hejab*. A chador covers all of a woman's body so that only her face remains visible.

In the spring of 1994, I began working part-time at a McDonald's. Even though Andre's salary wasn't too bad, we had been unable to save any money. My parents were now living with us as my children were growing up; expenses were on the rise. Michael was five and a half and in kindergarten at the time, and Thomas was a year old. My mother agreed to look after Thomas while I was at work. She was good to my children and gave them the love she had never given me. With my first paycheck—about three hundred dollars—I bought a swing set for the boys. I was so proud to be contributing to my family's finances.

When my parents first arrived in Canada, they were happy to be with us. But they had expected life here to be easier than it was. I simply couldn't meet their expectations. I was too busy working, and when I was home, I spent most of my time with my children. I had vowed to be a good mother, and I tried to accomplish this by being present in my children's lives. The boys and I went to the park, swimming pool, library, and movies when they were old enough. We biked and took long walks. Eventually, I signed Michael and Thomas up for soccer and piano lessons, and Andre coached the soccer teams. I wanted them to have the opportunities I had never had. Still, I tried not to spoil them. They knew they couldn't have everything they wanted. Andre and I worked hard, and we made it clear that we expected them to do the same. As a result, they did well in school.

My parents soon began to feel isolated in Canada. My father coped better with his adopted country than my mother did because he spoke English, but my mother's English was so limited that she stayed at home most of the time. She quickly became bored. In Iran, she had had friends and relatives to fill her time; in Toronto, she had no one except Alik, my father, Andre and me and our two boys. She couldn't make new friends because she spoke so little English and our neighbourhood was predominantly "white," with few Persians other than us. As well, we lived in a small semi-detached house, which didn't give any of us much privacy from one another. All these problems together with the long, harsh Canadian winters took their toll on my mother. She once told me she felt as if she were in prison. I wanted to say that she had no idea what being in prison was like, but I bit my tongue. Before long, she grew irritable and got upset over little things. I prayed she would come to see that she and my father had stayed in Tehran, their lives would have been much more difficult. Before Andre and I left Iran, and even when Andre's work caused us to live away from Tehran, across the country in the city of Zahedan, we'd paid half my parents' rent because we knew that if we didn't, they would be unable to live in a good neighbourhood. Prices had soared after the revolution, and middle-class families found it hard to pay their bills. My parents might not have a life of luxury in Canada, but they were safe and relatively comfortable. At least, this was how I saw it. Yet my mother was not happy. We had fight after fight, and after a while, we were barely talking to each other. My parents informed me that if I wanted them to babysit Thomas when I was at work, I had to pay them. I agreed. The situation became increasingly tough to bear, but I kept up hope that their dissatisfaction would pass. Andre was very patient, but my parents' behaviour caused him a great deal of stress, too.

In 1997 when I heard that a new Swiss Chalet would soon open close to my house, I applied for the job there and was hired. Every day, I went straight to work after dropping Michael off at school, then I picked him up after my shift ended. For the first three years or so, I usually walked to the restaurant, which took me about half an hour; when the weather was good, I rode my bike—I had bought it for

five dollars at a garage sale. After arriving at work, I did the morning prep: chopped and diced all the vegetables for the day and made salads and coleslaw before the restaurant opened at 11:00 a.m. At lunchtime on weekdays, I waitressed. I now earned tips, and compared with McDonald's, I had a better income. I liked my boss and co-workers, and before long, I had regular customers who would tell me about themselves and their families.

My customers often remarked that I had a "cute" accent and would ask me where I was from, and would encourage them to guess. Most thought I was Italian, or South American, even French. When I said that I was from Iran, they were surprised. Some knew a few things about Iran, and said I must be very happy to be in Canada. I told them I was. Many people, however, did not know much about Iran at all, and believed that it was similar to Afghanistan, when in fact the two countries are very different. Others thought that because I was from the Middle East, I was an Arab. I found this frustrating and explained to them that Arabs and Persians are two distinct peoples.

Historically, Persians are the people of the Great Persian Empire, which became the first superpower of the world about twenty-five hundred years ago. Persia is the land of the great Achaemenid kings (circa 550 BC to 330 BC) Cyrus and Darius; they made Persia the largest empire the world had ever seen. These kings were not mere conquerors; they showed respect and tolerance toward other cultures. Arabs trace their ancestry to the tribes of Arabia, who were the original inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula and the Syrian Desert. Arabs speak Arabic; Persians (Iranians) speak Persian (Farsi).

After two years of working at Swiss Chalet, I seemed to know most of the people in the community. It felt good. My biggest disappointment lay in not being able to return to school. I only had a high-school diploma and wanted to go on to university. However, that was impossible; we couldn't afford it. I had to think about my children's futures.

Living in a "normal" town and working a "normal" job almost made me believe that I was a "normal" person. People told me that I was cheerful, friendly, and kind. Why would anyone be any other way living in a country like Canada? No one ever asked me about the details of my life in Iran, and I was relieved that they didn't. The last thing I wanted was to revisit the past. However, life has its ways of reminding us about what we do not want to remember.

One winter day a few months before my mother's death, the first customer who came into the restaurant was a man in his late sixties. His grey hair was thinning and he was wearing a navy suit and a white shirt.

"Table for one?" I asked him from behind the hostess stand.

"No, two," he answered.

People waiting for people—this was usually the case at lunchtime. I always ended up having four or five tables with people waiting for someone to show up. Then everyone would arrive at once, and I'd have to deal with customers who wanted their food served immediately. Canadians, I discovered, were always in a rush.

"Would you like to sit by the window?" I asked the man.

"Sure," he replied.

I seated him at table five, put the menu in front of him, and walked to the kitchen. It was almost 11:30 a.m. Jimmy, the other daytime server, had just arrived. He was supposed to be in at 11:00, but he was always late. I didn't mind. Our lunch rush didn't start until noon. Although my shift ended at three, Jimmy would let me leave earlier if the restaurant wasn't busy. We had a give-and-take. We got along. He was in his late twenties, and trying to decide what to do with his life. Most of our servers were students. For them, working at Swiss Chalet was a passing moment. For me, it had become

destiny. I wasn't unhappy about that. I knew my children would have the opportunity to follow the dreams far from wars and revolutions.

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Putting on my name tag, I walked back to table five. The man was looking out the window. It had started to snow.

"Something to drink while you're waiting?" I asked.

"Two waters and two of your specials."

"Would you like me to place your order right now? The food won't take more than ten minutes to get here."

"The sooner the better."

By the time I delivered the meals, the man's friend—predictably—still hadn't arrived.

"Would you like me to take your friend's food back to the kitchen to keep it warm?" I said.

"No, leave it."

I put both orders on the table and walked away. A couple of minutes later, as I was seating another table, the man at table five, who was still eating alone, waved me over.

"Yes?" I said, guessing that he probably wanted me to remove his friend's food.

"Can we have two glasses of your white house wine? And the ketchup bottle is almost empty. My wife likes ketchup. Can you get us another bottle?" he said.

"Sure."

I poured two glasses of wine at the bar, watching table five. The man was talking to himself. Something was not right. I delivered the wine.

"Thank you," he said with his mouth full.

I walked to the hostess stand to greet the elderly couple waiting at the entrance. They were regulars, and I knew that the husband, Mark, had Alzheimer's disease. Helen, his wife, was smart, delicate, and still beautiful, with deep blue eyes and short grey hair. Mark was tall and handsome, with kind brown eyes, his well-made suit always perfectly pressed. I seated the couple at table six and looked at the man at table five. He was still alone.

"Heather, don't do this," I heard him say softly, and I knew for sure that his wife would not arrive.

I went to table six to take Mark's and Helen's orders.

"We'll have the quarter-chicken special," Helen said, "but salad instead of fries. I'll need extra napkins. Oh—and you remember that Mark likes extra Italian dressing on his salad."

"Of course," I said, nodding.

Mark stared vacantly at me.

"How are you today, Mark?" I asked, but he didn't reply.

The man at table five had finished eating. Both wineglasses stood empty on the table. He waved me over again.

"Yes?"

"We're done. I guess Heather wasn't too hungry. She hasn't been eating much lately. I think she's on a diet. She doesn't listen to me when I tell her to eat more. She's always been stubborn. Today is our fortieth wedding anniversary."

"Maybe Heather would like to have her food later. I can wrap it to go," I said. My voice sounded weak and distant to me.

"Thank you, but she doesn't like the taste of leftover chicken."

“Can I get you anything else?”

“What’s your name?” He narrowed his eyes, trying to read my name tag.

“Marina.”

“Thank you, Marina. You’ve been very kind.”

My face felt hot.

“Maybe Heather would like a slice of apple pie,” I suggested, uncertain why I was playing along.

“That’s a good idea. I think she would. One slice of apple pie with two forks, please, and two coffees.”

I went to the kitchen. Table six’s meals were ready. I delivered them.

“Who are you?” Mark asked me.

“Mark, this lady is our waitress. We’re here to have lunch. See? Your favourite. Chicken and salad. I’ll cut your chicken for you.”

“This is nice,” he said, and smiled at me. “Are you coming with us?”

I smiled back. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thank you,” said Helen.

I took one slice of apple pie and two coffees to table five.

“My name is Ed,” said the man, glancing down.

“Nice to meet you, Ed.”

“You’re probably wondering ...”

“I understand.”

Ed looked up. “She died six months ago.” He started eating his pie.

I gazed at his sad, clean-shaven face. A man having lunch at a Swiss Chalet restaurant with the memory of his wife. Where were my memories? What had I done with them?

Fighting my tears, I ran into the walk-in fridge and stayed there a few minutes. The silence and the cool dark air calmed me down.

By the time I returned to table five, Ed had left. On the back of the receipt, he had written “Mark, God bless you—Ed.” I put the receipt in my pocket.

It was snowing heavily now. The world resembled a snow globe. Up and down Yonge Street, cars and pedestrians inched along, burdened by the heavy whiteness. I felt trapped. There was a big knot in my chest.

I had to get out of the restaurant.

“I’m going home,” I said to Jimmy.

“You okay?” he asked.

“I have a headache.”

I almost raced to the old green Ford Escort I had bought a few months earlier. Once I had closed the door behind me, tears rolled down my face. Deep inside, I knew that the normalcy I had been clinging to was not real. I envied Ed. He was brave enough to face his loss. He was grieving. I had never grieved. I had fled from my pain, pretended it didn’t exist. Maybe Ed was crazy, but at least he acknowledged the ghosts that haunted him. I felt like a fraud. I thought about Mark. What if one day I was condemned to forget like him? But I had a family, a job, and a life, and I had to keep on going.

When I got home, I secured Ed’s receipt to my fridge door. I needed to see it every day so that maybe one day I might become brave.

ONE LATE-JULY EVENING in 2000, I was making spaghetti and meat sauce while the boys were busy playing upstairs. Shortly after my mother's death in March of that year, my father moved out of our house to a small apartment in a quiet and well-maintained seniors building, and in early July, we moved into a detached house, the picture-perfect suburban Canadian dream home, with four bedrooms and two and a half baths. Before our move, whenever I had a few minutes after work prior to picking up the kids, I would drive to the new house, park around the corner, and gaze at our future home. I imagine my children in their freshly painted bedrooms and Andre and me in our spacious master bedroom. What colour would I paint the living room? No more crazy yellows. A lilac, maybe?

The meat sauce came to a boil, and the scent of onions, tomatoes, and beef filled the house. I added a little oregano to the sauce, and my mind drifted.

*Evin. One of my interrogators, Ali, is reading to me from the Koran. The chapter is about the Virgin Mary. She's blessed. Why doesn't she help me go home?*

*They have tied me up to a bare wooden bed and are lashing the soles of my feet. Pain and nothing else. What have I done to deserve this? "Where's Shahrzad?" they keep on asking me. I don't know, or I would have told them.*

*It's dark and cold. I just want to go home and sleep in my bed, but I'm in a solitary cell, and a dirty, smelly military blanket is covering me. When I close my eyes, I can smell my mother's scent—a mix of Chanel No. 5 and cigarettes—and feel the warmth of her body.*

*Someone is kicking me. My whole body is aching. "Get up! Get up!" someone yells. It's my interrogator Hamehd.*

*I'm tied to a wooden pole. There are other prisoners like me here. Armed guards have surrounded us. My feet hurt. I'm tired. So tired.*

*The small body of my friend Sarah is hanging from a noose made of head scarves. Her face is blue. "Marina! Run! Get scissors! Hurry! Now!" Sheida yells. I run.*

*Ali is ripping off my clothes. He's on top of me and is holding down my wrists with his hands. I try to push him away but can't. I feel a terrible pain between my legs. I scream.*

*I'm walking away from Evin. They have finally let me go. It's raining, and it's cold.*

*Why did I leave my friends behind?*

I jolted back to reality at the sound of the fire alarm. Smoke was everywhere. The sauce had hardened into a strange black substance. I turned off the burner and opened all the windows. How had this happened? I was standing right at the stove!

My children ran down the stairs. "Mom, what's going on?"

"Don't worry. I just burned the food."

I hadn't thought of Evin since my release—had avoided it at all costs. Why was I thinking about him now? Why were my memories as clear and fresh in my mind as if my imprisonment had occurred last week?

That night, after a hot day that ended with a thunderstorm, I opened one of our bedroom windows before going to sleep. I had already kissed Andre good night, and, as usual, he had fallen asleep immediately. He snored mildly when he lay on his back, and I listened to the peaceful sounds he made. He was very handsome, maybe even more than when I had met him a few months before my arrest. He had matured, lost his boyish, shy look. I gazed at his perfect face: the gentle curved lines of his closed eyes and his blond eyelashes, his nose narrow and straight, his lips not too thick and not too thin. I fell in love with him the moment I saw him at our church in Tehran, and I think he fell in love with me the moment he laid eyes on me. Then Evin happened. In the prison, I hung on to his memories to survive. I hung on to my recollection of his perfect face and the thought that someone beautiful was in love with me. Before Evin, Andre had never told me he loved me, but I chose to believe it, and his love became my hope, a light that would guide me back to him one day. It would have been so much easier for him to forget me while I was in prison and move on, but he didn't. He waited for the girl he loved. Except, the girl who walked out of Evin was different from the one who'd been led in. Yes.

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