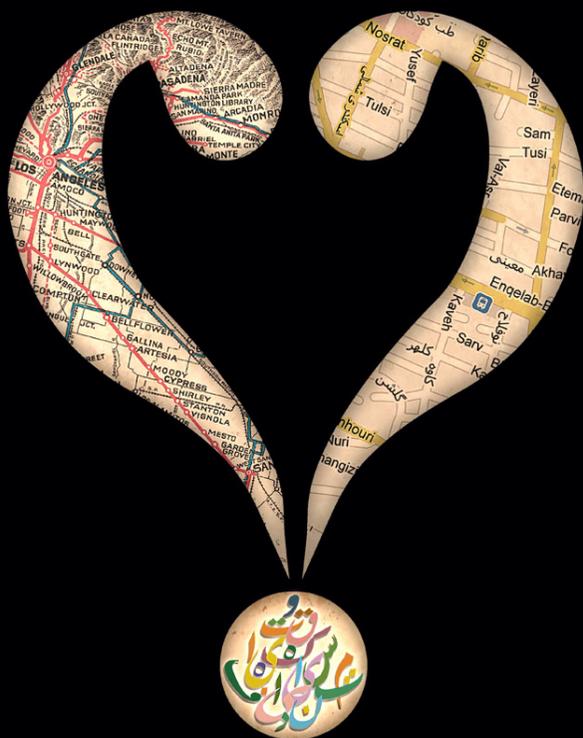


“Epic is how one should describe this novel. An exciting read from start to finish.”

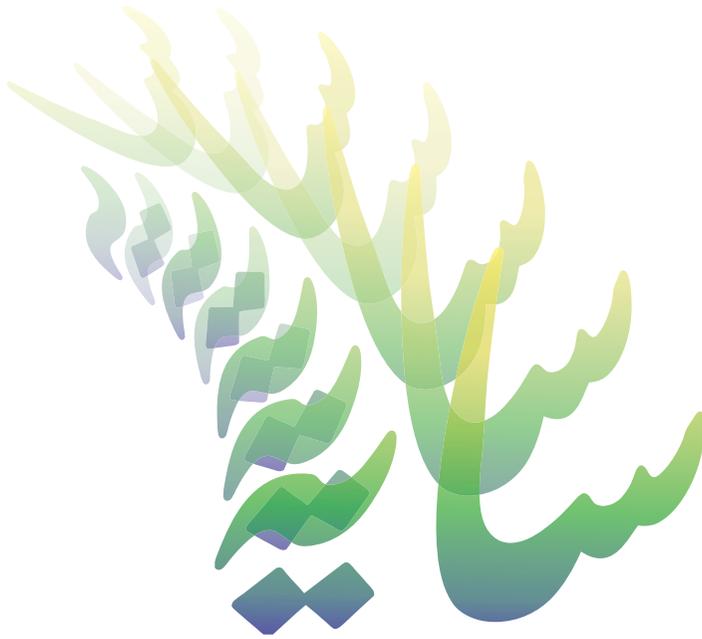
PERSIAN HERITAGE MAGAZINE

AS THE SHADOWS FALL



A NOVEL

MORT SHAHMIR



All the affairs of men hang by a slender thread; and sudden chance brings to ruins what once was strong.

OVID

We read the past by the light of the present, and the forms vary as the shadows fall, or as the point of vision alters.

J. A. FROUDE



FRIDAY | MARCH 14, 2003

1

Her name was Sepideh, which in Persian means Dawn. She was born on an early October morning and her parents thought she should be appropriately named for that occasion. Every now and then she heard her father commenting, “*Dokhtar janam*, my dear daughter, you came to this world with the first light of the day, and you brought light to our family. We could have named you *Pagah* or *Bamdad* as well, but *Sepideh* sounds so much better.” Her heart brimming with pride, she couldn’t be happier that her parents made that choice.

When Sepideh was a little girl, every morning her mother would come to her room, and while lovingly caressing her silky hair, she would wake her by chiming a sweet song into her ears:

*Sepideh, dokhtaram, cheshmato va kon
Be donyayeh ghashang e ma niga kon
Ze bam e khaneh morgh e shab parideh
Siahi rafteh o oomadeh sepideh
Sepideh, my little girl, open your eyes
Look at our beautiful world
The bird of night has flown off our roof
Darkness has disappeared and it’s dawn*

Even as she grew older, every time Sepideh thought of that little jingle that her mother had made up small tears welled in her eyes. As the words echoed in her mind, she could recall her mother’s melodic voice lilting through the air like the soft whisper of an angel. She would remember the scent of her mother’s hair that smelt like jasmines in their garden. Opening her lazy eyelids, she could see her mother’s smiling face and her deep black eyes that twinkled with love. She didn’t

mind to get out of her cozy bed because she knew that those sweet words would be followed by hours of fun and laughter that they would be spending together.

Sepideh always felt special hearing her name in a song. It might have been a silly thought, but she found it amusing to think that each new day began with her name and she often wondered why some of her Persian friends had Western names. To her ears Sepideh sounded much more pleasant than Sarah, Cathy, or Jennifer. Furthermore, her name was authentic and imparted a closeness to the sizable community of the Persians around her in Los Angeles. Not so often a few of her close friends affectionately called her Sepi. She didn't mind that, but deep down she disliked that abbreviation. She preferred her full name—the way her father with his raspy, cigarette-cured, Azerbaijani accent pronounced it: **Se-pi-deh**.

Sepideh was a 22-year-old liberal arts sophomore at UCLA, but with her mature demeanor she could have passed for older. Standing medium height and slender with smooth olive skin and silky black hair, she was the perfect picture of Middle Eastern femininity. Fixed to her well-appointed head was a pair of delicately curved eyebrows arched above two subtly slanted eyes. Her eyes were dark brown and well proportioned for her face like two almonds set upon a bed of milky white satin. Her wonderful full lips had a kind of seductive quality, and with a just trace of lipstick, they glistened like a pair of pink roses in the mist. Her features bore resemblance to the ethereal figures in ancient Middle Eastern miniature paintings, but in reality she was a girl of Persian heritage, born and raised in Los Angeles. She might not have been the conventional cover girl, but she was exotic, miles away from the bleach-blonde typical California girl. There was something in her facial expressions, in her animated walk, in her gentle voice that made her special. She possessed a kind of airy radiance about her that her female and male friends found quite attractive. In certain lights she looked as if she could have been the subject of a lost Vermeer or indeed the reincarnation of an ancient Persian queen.

The boy sitting across the table from Sepideh was Bijan, also from a Persian family, born in the US. Only a few years older than Sepideh, he was starting his first-year as a medical student at UCLA. His name was short, easy to pronounce, and familiar to most Americans, mainly those aware of the famous designer and perfume maker, Bijan.

As a young boy Bijan often wondered if his name had any particular meaning. He had no idea whether it did or not, but the thought intrigued him. Most of his American classmates were named after famous characters in the Bible or the US

history. There were three Persian boys in his class who were named Keyvan, Rahim, and Babak. Those kids didn't seem to be interested in knowing the origin of their own names. But Bijan was quite inquisitive. So one day he decided to ask his father. His father took him to their home library and showed him his *Shahnameh*, the Book of Persian Kings.

The oversized book was bound in handsomely embossed brown leather. It was encased in an exquisite light blue silk slipcover. The case and the book cover were gold-stamped. It must have been a very old edition, since the pages had a yellowish tint, emitting the scent of the air in an old bookstore. The words in the book were written in Persian and Bijan could not read them and understand their meanings. However, he very much liked the way the characters curved, curled, and intertwined, as if they were dancing on the page. The book contained many beautiful miniature paintings, described by his father as the works of a famous Persian artist. As his father read and translated a chapter in the book, Bijan learned that his namesake was a famous lover in Persian mythology.

While on a mission, ordered by king Kai Khosrow, the mythological Bijan accidentally crossed the border and entered the palace compound of the neighboring king. In the palace's garden he saw several young women celebrating the beginning of the spring and the New Year. As it happened, one of the women was Manijeh, the king's daughter. It was love at first sight for both of them. When Bijan announced his intention to leave, Manijeh gave him a cup of wine, which put him to sleep. The maids carried Bijan to the palace, where Manijeh hid him, and no one except her maids were aware of the secret. Unfortunately for the young lovers, Manijeh's father learned that his daughter had been hiding a man in her quarter. He sent a few guards, captured Bijan, and imprisoned him in a pit in the desert. The entrance to the pit was blocked with a huge boulder so no one could enter it.

Manijeh was also punished by her father. She was expelled from the palace and was sent to the desert where Bijan had been imprisoned. Manijeh dug a tunnel to Bijan's prison, and through that tunnel spoke to him. Every day she went to the city and begged for food and brought it to Bijan and fed him.

When King Kai Khosrow learned about Bijan's ordeal, he sent Rostam, the strongest Persian warrior, to rescue Bijan. Rostam found Manijeh in the city and she took him to the pit where Bijan was imprisoned. Using his mighty power, Rostam moved the weighty rock and freed Bijan. At last the suffering lovers were reunited.

Endowed with Persian genes, Bijan was a hopeless sentimental soul and al-

ways found that romantic story simultaneously fascinating and titillating. He was too young to be able to study Persian literature. In fact, he even couldn't fluently speak, read or write in Persian. He barely understood the spoken Persian words and some simple expressions. But somehow he instinctively related to it. Deep inside he was aware that a mysterious tie existed between him and the people whose civilization and culture spanned over twenty-five centuries and they had enriched the world with beautiful poetry, magnificent arts, and awe-inspiring architecture.

The story of the love affair between mythological Bijan and Manijeh, as told by the great Persian poet, Ferdowsi, was quite beautiful and Manijeh's efforts to save her lover were admirable. Bijan often wondered which one of the famous lovers in the Western culture had made a great sacrifice like Manijeh? He had no answer. Later on, when he read great works of literature, he thought perhaps the gallantry of Sir Lancelot to rescue his beloved Guinevere from the fire came close.

However, Bijan could not stop thinking that the characters in the fairy tales and works of fiction were quite different from the ordinary people. The writers and poets enjoy the literary license to create circumstances that would not exist in the real world. In his late teen years he was eagerly reading the romance novels, but the concept of love was beyond his comprehension.

Every time the subject came up and he said something to that effect, Bijan's father recited one of his own favorite old Persian love poems and commented, "Bijan jan, dear, true love gives you the power to move mountains." Then, with a subtle blush of embarrassment on his face, he would add, "Or something like that! Son, you have no idea how hard it is for me to translate Persian poetry into English. The concepts are completely different. There is abundant symbolism in the Eastern literature and it is practically impossible to find their suitable counterparts in the English language. Many words and expressions lose their true meaning in translation."

Bijan could sympathize with his father, although, in truth, he had no idea about what he was talking. He did not know enough Persian to have an opinion. But he could sense that sometimes his father was struggling to find the right Persian words during conversation with his Persian friends and family members. It sounded as if he was translating his thoughts from English to Persian. And of course, there was a very good reason for that. He had lived in the US for over a quarter of century and spoke English virtually all the time. "I get this terrible headache when I navigate between English and Persian languages. Sometimes I feel my brain

cells play seesaw in my head," his father would say with a chuckle. He certainly wouldn't be hired as a professional translator, Bijan always thought.

Since Bijan's mother was of Irish descent, they spoke to each other at home entirely in English. He had learned just a little Persian by being around and hearing his father talking with his Persian relatives or friends. Even their conversation was often in a language that Bijan called Persianglish. It consisted of Persian dialogue, peppered with English words and expressions.

Tall and lean—with fair complexion, hazel eyes, and blond hair—Bijan looked more European than Persian. He obviously had inherited his skin color and some of his facial features from his beautiful mother. Yet like his father, he sported a pair of typical thick Persian eyebrows and a subtle aquiline nose—the features that were unquestionably the expression of his paternal genes. In some respects, the absence of typical Middle Eastern appearance was a blessing for Bijan. In the tense political environment after 9/11/2001, he didn't have to worry about being the subject of intensive security checks at the airports.

The Best Brew coffee shop across the UCLA campus was a favorite hang out for the college students. It was a non-descript, brightly lit place with scratched Formica tables, comfortable wooden chairs, and a couple of rather worn-out leather sofas. But nowhere in LA could one get a better latté or espresso; thanks to Fernando, its friendly and mustachioed manager, who could do magic with a bag of coffee beans.

Anytime during the day there were at least a dozen patrons in the coffee shop. They were mostly a young crowd, who would sit at the tables, reading or chatting with friends while nibbling on a snack. The school faculty and personnel would come for coffee and pastries, but surrounded by the youthful din gossip and studying they always left quickly. For some of the students the coffee shop was almost an extension of the school library. They would bring seemingly every book they owned, splay them out over an entire table and voraciously study all day if they could. Others would bring laptops and prop them up on their tables working on term papers or surfing the web while sipping on their drinks, casually glancing around to see if anyone of interest had walked through the door.

Around 2:30 on that Friday afternoon there were perhaps less than a dozen patrons at the coffee shop. Some were in groups of twos and threes sitting around a couple of bigger tables chatting in whispers and giggling. A few solitary ones were deep into their books and laptops. The faces were young and free of the wrinkles that only the passage of time and painful experiences in life could carve

into their skin. The pleasant warm air inside, saturated with the thick aroma of coffee, contrasted with the unseasonably chilly mid March weather outside. Every now and then the relative silence was broken by loud words exchanged between a new customer and the cashier, immediately igniting the barista to grind espresso or steam milk.

Bijan and Sepideh were sitting at a small table near the door. Almost everyone in the shop was wearing a sweater of some kind. Fresh air would gust in behind entering patrons and mingle with the nutty-hot aroma of the brewing coffee. Outside along the sidewalk, a row of sycamore trees was bathed in crisp afternoon sunlight, the color of their young leaves resembling molten gold. Outside of the window, two very large round planters boasted a robust collection of delicate purple and yellow pansies, which were dancing in the gentle breeze. There was something quite pleasant in the way the shadows of the trees created intricate shapes on the sidewalk. Something special and vital was in the air that was even palpable inside: the feeling that life was in force producing its splendors in every nook and cranny. For Sepideh and Bijan, like all the Persians around the world, the middle of March meant that the spring equinox was only one week away. *Norooz*, the Persian New Year, was right around the corner. The air was fresh and hopeful, as if all the great and goodly things the world had yet to arrive.

“Bijan, are you coming to Siamak’s birthday party with me or not?” Sepideh asked. Impatient with Bijan’s lack of a response at her third query, Sepideh wrinkled her mouth like a frustrated scientist seeing his final test go south.

Bijan was silent. Blankly staring at Sepideh’s face, he looked as though he hadn’t heard the question. Lightly tapping on the table with his fingers, he seemed to be in a trance. If she could have read his mind, she would have known that he was preoccupied with many issues, but deep down, he was thinking that the girl sitting next to him was the most beautiful woman in the world.

And Bijan had every reason to think that way. For the first time in his young life he was in love. Even though he hadn’t yet told her ‘I love you,’ his every breath silently shouted those words. Seeing Sepideh, inhaling her perfume, and touching her skin filled him with warmth, made him tingle. He had never had those feelings around other girls before. In his eyes no girl matched Sepideh’s beauty. Each time Bijan reflected on his own feelings for Sepideh, he recalled the story of the famous Persian lovers, Leyla and Majnoon that his father had told him many years ago:

Once upon a time there was a young man, named Qays, who fell in love with a girl, named Leyla. Qays was a man of meager means and Leyla’s wealthy father

did not see him as an appropriate suitor for his daughter. Rejected and depressed, Qays led a secluded life in the desert. He was acting strange and people thought he had gone insane, so they called him “majnoon,” crazy. A friend who didn’t find Leyla very attractive wondered, “Qays, why are you ruining your life for a skinny and homely girl?” Majnoon replied, “You must look at Leyla with my eyes. In Majnoon’s eyes there is no girl prettier than Leyla in the whole wide world.”

“Bijan, you’re really getting on my nerves. It’s rude of you not answering my question,” Sepideh said angrily. Shifting in her chair, she rolled her eyes and looked out the window vaguely hoping for something to distract her while Bijan seemingly ignored her. Outside a man was walking his joyful Greyhound. The beautiful dog had a long and pointed face and his starkly white chest glowed in the sunlight. A car honked and the dog tenuously skittered across the pavement to avoid getting hit.

A trace of a smile appearing on her lips, Sepideh looked back at Bijan. A gloomy thousand-yard stare in his eyes, he was aloof and alone in his mind thinking of things she couldn’t imagine. Sensing she was looking, he glanced quickly at her and was summoned back to the world.

“I’m sorry, Sepideh. I was listening. I’ve had a lot on my mind in the past couple of days,” Bijan said. His voice was gravelly. He reached for her hand, “You were talking about Siamak’s birthday party, weren’t you?” He replied softly and brushed her knuckles with this thumb. The tone of his voice was revealing his inner melancholic mood.

“Y . . e . . s!” Sepideh replied sarcastically.

“See! I was listening,” Bijan said triumphantly.

Noticing the weary expression on Bijan’s face, Sepideh decided to leave the birthday party issue aside for the moment. With a sympathetic smile she asked, “Is something wrong, Bijan? You don’t seem to be yourself today. Tell me what’s bothering you?”

“Oh, nothing serious. Just family stuff, you know,” he said trying to skirt talking about what was going on in his head.

Sepideh smiled for reassurance. “What kind of family stuff?....If you don’t mind me asking?” she asked.

Sepideh was trying to choose her words carefully. She wanted to make sure that her questions wouldn’t shine light on any deeply private matters. Was she privy to personal issues in Bijan’s life? she wondered. They had known each other only for a few months and still hadn’t even met each other’s parents. Did he mind

if she became too personal? she didn't know exactly. But, what the heck, she thought. She was going to ask anyway. She cared about him so much, and it was natural that she wanted to help if something was troubling him.

"It's my mom," Bijan said with an empty smile. "She's got this medical problem that bothers her every now and then," he added hesitantly.

It was obvious that Bijan wasn't too enthusiastic about releasing more information. He wouldn't retain his gaze, constantly looking somewhere else. And when he did manage to keep eye contact, his eyes were glassy and distant. She could tell by the way he paused before saying 'medical problem,' that perhaps his mother's condition was not trivial.

Not quite sure where to stop, Bijan added, "Well, it's a kind of heart condition that goes back many years. Some kind of irregularity in the heart rhythm. I think it's been bothering my mom more recently. My dad called today and said she had another episode last night. I'm planning to go see her later." Bijan's face was contorted and his lips pursed, as if he were watching his mother in the distance suffering in excruciating pain.

"If it's her heart, isn't it serious?" Sepideh asked leaning in closer.

"I really don't know how serious it is. As much as I've been told, she's had this problem since she was in her twenties, but very infrequently. In the past few years she's been hospitalized a few times but only briefly," Bijan responded. Then, shaking his head in frustration, he continued, "You know how Persian parents are? They don't share a lot of stuff with their children. I guess they worry that the children may not be able to handle serious issues or something like that."

"Mine aren't much different," Sepideh said bobbing her head in agreement. "I don't know much about my parents either. They keep everything inside. Apparently they think it's a sign of weakness to talk about their problems in front of the children. How silly is that?"

Bijan remained quiet. He wiped the table in front of him aimlessly flecking stray cookie crumbs onto the floor.

"But your father is a cardiologist. Shouldn't he be able to keep it under control?" Sepideh whispered.

"My father doesn't believe practicing medicine on his family members," Bijan replied sternly, as if he was reciting a code from the Hippocratic oath. Looking directly into Sepideh's eyes, he added, "He doesn't even prescribe cough medicine for us. But he definitely has the best cardiologists looking after her. This heart condition is very unpredictable. When I was about 14, they did a procedure on her

heart and clipped some of the nerve fibers in her heart that they thought were responsible for the irregularities. It was a temporary fix. A couple of years ago she had a severe case and she passed out. They had to give her an electric shock. It was awful," Bijan finished his sentence with a deflated sigh. His face had turned several shades whiter and was now almost the color of the beige Best Brew napkins on the table.

"Oh, no!" Sepideh almost shouted, attracting the attention of a few people in the coffee shop. "Was there any permanent damage to her heart?" she asked, biting her lower lip.

"Fortunately, none," Bijan replied and quickly reached for Sepideh's hand. He noticed the whitish indentation of the bite mark on Sepideh's lip, as it gradually disappeared. "It may not be all due to the problem with her heart." Bijan looked pensive.

"Oh, ya?" Sepideh whispered in surprise.

"One of the specialists suggested that her heart problem might be caused by anxiety," Bijan said.

"Anxiety?" Sepideh asked with a hint of disbelief. "Is she on any medications?" she asked immediately without thinking. After she said it, she realized that she might have been prying. Bijan didn't notice her reaction or take offense. His eyes were shallowly fixed on the table in front of him.

"Yes, but, I'm not sure if she's taking them regularly. She is very stubborn about that kind of stuff. I mean taking medications."

Bijan moved closer, as if trying to share a more serious matter. "Personally, I think the episodes have been more frequent recently," Bijan added, over-emphasizing the word personally, frustration in his tone. Then after a brief pause he continued, "I think she's been more depressed lately. She doesn't seem to laugh as often as she used to."

"I'm terribly sorry, Bijan. I had no idea..." Sepideh reached out and began caressing Bijan's hand in consolation. She didn't know what else to do.

"Well, what can you do? I mean, what can anyone do?" Bijan whispered. "I, ..." Bijan opened his mouth, but nothing came out. The lines around his eyes and the corner of his mouth turned darker and deeper. Gently biting his lips, it was obvious that it took him a great deal of effort to say that much about his mother's medical condition. Picturing his sweet mother suffering from a serious illness, he felt as if the weight of the entire universe was on his shoulders. But deep inside his heart there was a glimmer of comfort. He was a very private individual. Except for

his father, he didn't have anyone to whom he could talk about his own personal issues. In Sepideh he had found someone, a gracious ear. She seemed so perceptive and eager to listen to him. Talking with Sepideh was as easy as breathing fresh air. It was such a relief. In the past he would lug the heavy cart of terrible thoughts all by himself. Now he had someone to help him pull it along.

"I hate to speculate, but . . ." Bijan hesitated, "you know I'm not around them like I used to be. But something has changed between my parents."

"What do you mean, Bijan?" Sepideh asked, but wasn't sure if she wanted to know more. She was worried that she might have wandered into some sort of a familial uncharted territory.

"Well, they don't act like they used to. I don't know. They are just different," Bijan said bitterly. Then, sensing that Sepideh was expecting more clarification, he added, "You know what I'm trying to say. Like most Persian families, there used to be a lot of hugging and kissing. But there hasn't been so much lately."

Sepideh remained silent. Avoiding eye contact, she didn't want Bijan to be more upset than he already was. She didn't like to see him like that. To her, he was always a strong man and she didn't want to see him in a brooding state. But she was drawn to him and to his hardship—regardless of the circumstances—ready to help him steer the fragile boat of his emotions through the troubled waters of his family's woe.

"Well, as I said, it might be nothing at all," Bijan said quietly. Then like offering up some sort of state secret, he added in a hushed tone, "But, between you and me, my mother thinks my father is having an affair with one of the nurses at the hospital. She hasn't said it to me openly, but every now and then she makes some comments to that effect. "

Holding his head down, Bijan paused to think. Sepideh leaned forward in an effort to show her understanding. Their heads only a foot apart, he could smell the pleasant perfume of her hair. Somehow it reminded him of his mother's hair spray. Looking up, he noted the affection in Sepideh's eyes. He could clearly see the love for him in her eyes. She was the bright star in the inky-black sky of his distressed mind.

"Can it be true, Bijan? Do you really believe it's true?" Sepideh asked in disbelief, eyebrows practically jumping off her forehead to run and hide.

"Yes, and no! And that's the problem," Bijan said and shrugged. Instantly he thought he had slid into Hamlet's skin and was reciting the phrase "To be, or not to be." With a faint smile creasing his mouth, he fiddled more with the napkin in

his hand and added, "I think I know my dad. He is a very handsome and popular man. Unabashedly, he is a flirt, though. Is he liable to submit to temptations and have an affair? I don't know. Well, all I know is that he isn't a saint. When a man is surrounded by a bunch of pretty young women who worship him like a golden god, he may not be able to resist such temptations. To answer your question, it may be possible."

Bijan swallowed his saliva and pondered over his own words. What was he saying? Was he indirectly sympathizing with his father's supposed philandering?

Sepideh caught that slant in Bijan's comment as well, but she didn't think that flirting amounted to having an affair. So, while carefully choosing her words, she said, "Flirting with female staff in the hospital, while not the smartest thing in the world for a doctor to do, may be an innocent gesture. I wouldn't say it's the same as having an affair." Sepideh finished her thought, hoping that it would make a positive break in the heavy discussion. She was ready to move on to another lighter topic.

"Well maybe it isn't, but as you said, it's not cool!" Bijan snapped. He seemed to be angry with himself for airing so much of his family's dirty laundry. But it was obvious that he wanted to make sure Sepideh wouldn't get the wrong impression of his father

"Sepideh, as I said, this is what my mother believes. If my father were more reassuring, I'm sure my mother wouldn't have made it such a big issue. I don't know. It's just one of those things. I can't do anything about it and it kind of grates on me," he said.

"Have you talked with your father about this?" Sepideh asked hesitantly.

"No way!" Bijan said waving his hand, swatting the suggestion like a fly. "It's a sensitive issue. I wouldn't feel comfortable even bringing it up. It's between them. Okay, let's just forget about it," he said.

"I know how difficult it can be. Talking with parents about their sex life? I sure wouldn't be able to do that with my parents. Not in a million years. Ew!" Sepideh said blushing.

A leggy blond passed by their table wagging her ponytail like a golden rope from her head. She looked at Bijan and smiled. He nodded and smiled back. That seemed to lift his mood for a moment. He looked to Sepideh. She didn't seem too pleased. He blinked and shrugged.

"It must be genetic!" Sepideh squealed.

"Huh? Oh, Come on, Sepideh!" Bijan responded, reaching for her elbow. "She

is the sister of one of my classmates. What do you want me to do? Ignore her?"

Sepideh decided to remain silent. With a broad smile, Bijan added, "I'm not a flirt like my father. He is truly a Persian man. You know they say that love, poetry, and wine are in the blood of Persian men."

"I've heard that tale before. Remember my father is also a hot-blooded Persian man," Sepideh said. Her eyes still wandering after that blond girl, she gently removed her hand from Bijan's embrace. In a subtle way she was making clear that in her presence he wasn't allowed to show interest in other girls.

"I know how Persian men act sometimes, but that doesn't mean I have to like it!" she whispered.

"Sepideh, I hope you didn't get the wrong impression," Bijan looked very serious. "My parents really are nice people. My mother is very reserved and keeps everything inside and doesn't complain. But it's her habit to make a mountain out of a molehill. You may not believe what I'm telling you, but truly I don't know much about my mother's past. Of course, there are some of her old pictures in our family album, but that's all I know. I have a feeling that she didn't have a very happy childhood," Bijan said.

He paused. His eyes were watering ever so slightly. Sepideh noticed and reached and softly patted him on the shoulder.

"I know my parents love each other immensely," Bijan said, somewhat flatly. The expression on his face was vague at the notion that his statement might not be true. "I grew up in a loving family. One of these days you will meet my parents and you'll see what I mean," he added, trying hard to be convincing.

"Oh, Bijan! I've no doubt. I want to meet them soon," Sepideh said positively.

Moving closer, she held Bijan's hands tightly between hers. His hands were warm and smooth as velvet. That was another thing she liked about Bijan, his soft hands. She wondered if maybe Bijan's father had the same soft hands—it would only make sense.

"Let's talk about something else," Sepideh said.

A silence fell between them. Before he could start on a different track, a barrel-shaped man with a dark complexion walked into the coffee shop. He was bald and stocky like a ham hock with legs. Sepideh was sitting close to the entrance door and the cold breeze that trailed-in behind the man sent a chill up her spine. The air around him was saturated with fragrance but not with American cologne. To Sepideh, he looked Middle Eastern and immediately she recognized the scent of rosewater, the favorite perfume worn by Persian Moslems.

The man walked with a subtle limp. Each step seemed to pain him, but he wouldn't let on. Looking closely at him, you could tell his pain by the way he squinted his right eye each time he took a step forward. The man passed Sepideh and Bijan's table, sporting a friendly smile. There was something in that smile that made Sepideh pay more attention to him. He had a faint gray beard that was neatly trimmed and a pair of glasses sat over his rather crooked nose. There was a rather deep scar that ran diagonally from his scalp to the bottom of his cheek. Apparently, the unfortunate man didn't have enough money to fix that scar with plastic surgery, Sepideh thought.

After moving a few steps from their table, the man stopped, turned around and fixed his black eyes back on Sepideh. His piercing gaze made Sepideh quite uncomfortable. This was no one she knew, so why was he staring at her like he did, she wondered?

"Are you Miss Sepideh Behzad?" The man spoke in perfect Persian. His voice was warm and quite friendly.

"Well . . ." Sepideh was taken off guard, "yes!" she responded cautiously. She thought it would be discourteous not to answer the question; he very well could have been an acquaintance of her father.

"I thought so," the man said with a wider smile, intermittently looking between Sepideh and Bijan.

For some reason Bijan disliked the strange man's demeanor. He didn't approve of Sepideh telling that man who she was. Bijan's Persian genes had kicked into action. He felt responsible to protect his girlfriend. But he kept quiet, knowing that Sepideh was quite capable of handling herself.

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, Sepideh *khanoom*, lady," the man said. Holding his right hand over his chest and his head bent over to his chest, he gestured an apology in Persian, "I don't believe I ever had the pleasure of meeting you, but I know your father . . . Mr. Jalal Behzad."

There wasn't anything sinister in the man's remark. Sepideh took a deep breath, but Bijan was still on guard.

Keeping eye contact with Sepideh and Bijan alike, the man said, "My name is Aziz. I have a restaurant in Westwood, . . . Banafsheh bakery. I don't believe I have seen you two there." A pause punctuated the conversation. Then, pointing his finger at Sepideh, Aziz continued, "But your father comes to my store every now and then I don't have to tell you this, but he is a very nice man. He is a friendly *hamvatan*, countryman. He likes my specialty soup."

“Good to know!” Sepideh said politely. She hoped the man would leave. She couldn’t figure out why he was standing there and was saying those things. But she knew how some Persians couldn’t understand that they might be intrusive when they actually meant to be friendly. Bijan was fidgeting in his seat, close to getting up. Perhaps noticing the fire in Bijan’s eyes, the man chuckled and backed up, “I won’t bother you anymore. Please tell your father I said hello. And please don’t forget to come and visit my bakery.”

After a bow, the man moved away towards the counter, seemingly to place an order. But, after a few steps, he stopped and turned around, flashed a rather mysterious smile at Sepideh, and walked out.

Sepideh had turned pale. The way the man smiled spooked her. She couldn’t stop visualizing his nasty scar. How had he gotten it, in a knife fight? she wondered.

“What was that all about?” Bijan asked while staring at Sepideh. She was breathing fast, chest heaving as if she’d run up several flights of stairs to get to class on time.

“I have no idea,” Sepideh replied with a sigh, “I’ve heard about that bakery, but never been in it. My father might have mentioned it a few times. He knows all those places in Westwood.”

“Strange man!” Bijan sounded with a hint of disdain.

“Forget it!” Sepideh snapped, trying to put the incident behind her.

“It doesn’t matter how long some Persians live in this country, they just don’t learn the proper etiquette. They can be so annoying,” Bijan whispered.

“Let it go, Bijan!” Sepideh said frowning at Bijan. The sour look on her face prompted Bijan to remain silent. He raised his arms and stretched with a yawn.

Sepideh continued, “It was just a friendly gesture. Didn’t you hear he said *hamvatan*? You may not agree, but most Persians like to acknowledge their countrymen and enjoy being acquainted with them.” Sepideh didn’t sound very convincing.

“Whatever you say. But I thought the guy was a creep,” Bijan said half-joking. Sepideh ignored him.

Bijan looked at his watch. “Oh, crap! It’s a quarter past three already. I have a meeting with my advisor. And I’ve got racquetball with Steve at 5:30 this afternoon. I’ve got to run. What are you doing for the rest of the day?” Bijan asked, as he got up.

Sepideh stood up and grabbed her purse that was hanging on the back of her

chair. There was a subtle jitter in her hands that didn’t escape Bijan’s observing eyes.

“I’m done with school today,” Sepideh said, tilting her head sideways and running her fingers into her hair. They were still inside, standing a couple of feet from the door. Unconsciously, Sepideh’s eyes wandered through the window, as if trying to spot Aziz, who was long gone.

“I’ve got a hair appointment at 4:30. And later this evening I’m going with my parents to a party at my uncle’s home,” Sepideh added.

“That’s nice. What’s the occasion?” Bijan asked, even though he really had no particular interest in the answer.

“It’s a pre-Norooz party. If there is such a thing,” Sepideh paused to examine Bijan’s reaction.

“Pre-Norooz party. That’s a new one!” Bijan sounded sarcastic.

“Well, my uncle and aunt like to throw a party for the Persian New Year. But, since other relatives and friends have their own parties, my uncle’s and aunt’s party is usually held about a week before Norooz. The party in our home is always exactly on Norooz. You know how Persian families and friends love to get together and have fun at every opportunity,” Sepideh said.

The sunlight poured in through the clear glass window, illuminating Sepideh’s face. The lines around her mouth and two faint dimples on her cheeks aroused Bijan. He was fighting the temptation to jump and kiss her right on the spot.

Suddenly, several young girls rushed to get into the café, causing Bijan and Sepideh to move aside. He grabbed her arm and they came into an embrace. A waft of her intoxicating perfume filled his nose.

“Let’s get out of here,” Bijan said and they walked out of the door. Standing on the sidewalk, Bijan took a deep breath. The chilly breeze had vanished and the air was silky.

“You were talking about Persian parties,” Bijan said with a wistful note in his tone, which suddenly changed to gloom, “I really don’t know much about that.”

The expression on Bijan’s face startled Sepideh.

“We don’t have very close relatives in the US,” Bijan added, “My father’s brother, Uncle Farid, is the only first-degree relative and he is not married and has no children. There are a few more distant relatives in other states, but we don’t have much contact with them. My mother has no relatives in the US,” Bijan spoke monotonously, avoiding eye contact with Sepideh. She reached and caressed his knuckles.

“Sometimes I wish we did a little celebration during *Norooz*,” Bijan continued. “I really like having the New Year celebration on the first day of spring. It makes a lot more sense than having it in the middle of cold ass weather. But, my mother is Catholic and we always have a big party at Christmas. This past year’s party was awesome. I’m sorry you were out of town and couldn’t attend.”

“I’m sorry, too. It would’ve been a good opportunity to meet your parents,” Sepideh said sweetly.

“My father had a ball and for the first time in a long time I saw him actually getting loaded,” Bijan said and laughed. “He kept denying it, but he really was drunk.”

Sepideh smiled. She never had seen her own father drunk, because alcohol never found its way into their home.

“You’ll get to know my father,” Bijan said with a chuckle. “He never makes a fuss over *Norooz* or other Persian celebrations. Frankly, he doesn’t take any of the special days in the calendar seriously. He always comments that all the days in the year are the same and if you’re happy every day is a holiday. However, he enjoys any kind of party,” Bijan added.

Running her fingers into her hair, Sepideh produced a faint yawn and said, “I want to cut my hair a little shorter. Don’t you think it is too long?”

Bijan moved closer and said, “No, Sepideh, it doesn’t matter what the length or style of your hair is, you’ll always be beautiful. And that’s a fact. All right, I’ve got to go.” He pecked her on the cheek lovingly and made a move to walk away.

Sepideh firmly grabbed his elbow and said, “Wait a minute, mister! What about Siamak’s party? Are you coming?”

As if awakened from a deep sleep, Bijan yawned. He looked impatient. “Sepideh, why do you want me to go to that party?” he asked

“Because you’re invited,” she said.

“I am?” Bijan looked surprised.

“Yes! My invitation is for two, and I want you to be with me. That’s why,” Sepideh tugged on his elbow for emphasis.

“Siamak is a jerk. I’m sorry. I know he is your relative, but I must say he is a jerk,” Bijan smiled and affectionately touched Sepideh’s cheek.

A patron rushed out the cafe and smiled at them. Bijan wrapped his arms tightly around Sepideh. “So, you really want me to go to that party and suffer the company of Siamak and his obnoxious friends? You know very well that I have had the pleasure of meeting him and his friends before,” Bijan spoke softly.

“Yes! I know. Hopefully it won’t be as bad as the other time. Frankly, not all of

Siamak’s friends are bad. Some of them are very nice people,” she said looking up at Bijan.

“Granted! I don’t want to argue about that issue. I’ll go with you,” Bijan said.

“Thanks, Bijan. It means a lot to me. It just makes me feel so much better having you there. Maybe that would stop Siamak from making advances. You know what I mean,” Sepideh said. She playfully poked Bijan in the ribs teasing him.

You know what I mean,” Sepideh said. She playfully poked Bijan in the ribs teasing him.

“So, I would be playing the role of your bodyguard?” Bijan chuckled.

“No, silly! You’ll be my boyfriend. I want everybody, particularly Siamak, to know that I’m not available,” she said, then, after a brief pause, she added, “Siamak’s birthday is a few days before *Norooz* and every year he throws a party to celebrate both occasions. I expect a lot of people would be there. It will be good for everybody to know we are a couple.”

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Bijan pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and checked the calendar. “What day is the party exactly?” he asked.

“Tuesday evening. March the 18th, if you want to mark the date,” Sepideh said. Moving closer, she gently touched the keys on the cell phone with her index finger, as if she was showing Bijan how to do it right.

Bijan ignored the smirk on Sepideh’s face. Taking a sigh of relief, he said, “Siamak lucked out. I have no appointments that evening. Barring any unforeseen event, I may be able to make it.”

Putting her index finger on Bijan’s lips, Sepideh said with a glowing smile, “I told you. No excuses!” Then, with twinkles in her eyes, she added, “You have to see their home. It is a magnificent palace.” She placed her head on Bijan’s chest. He wondered if she could sense his heart racing at her closeness. He had no idea that at Siamak’s birthday party he would come upon a few surprises.

2

Sepideh walked briskly towards the parking lot where her old Nissan was soaking up the sunlight. She got in and started the engine. She could see the tiniest amount of vapor from her breath. Pulling out into the street, she noticed a gray Cadillac with tinted windows crank the ignition.

Not paying much attention, Sepideh drove along Westwood Blvd. towards Charles Young Drive, listening to the radio—Steely Dan’s “Do It Again.” She looked up into the rear-view mirror. The gray Cadillac was behind her. It didn’t seem to be anything unusual, but when she looked back into the mirror to make a left turn, the Cadillac took the same turn. Suddenly she was alarmed. Was it just a coincidence or was she being followed? The thought scared her. Who was following her? she wondered. Was he the strange man at the coffee shop?

Sepideh sped up, but, in fright, she noticed that the Cadillac did the same. The distance between them was only about ten feet. The reflection of the sun made it hard for her to see the driver. It was possible that a passenger was also in the car. She immediately thought to pick up her cell phone and call Bijan or the police. But, what if it was just a coincidence? she thought. That would be terribly embarrassing. She slowed down, and the Cadillac did the same. Scared to death, she had no idea what to do. In desperation Sepideh decided to do a test. There was a very little traffic in the street. Around Gayley Avenue she turned on her signal and made a motion to stop the car at the curb. She figured in case the Cadillac did the same, there would be no doubt that its driver was following her. In that case, she would drive away quickly and would call Bijan and the police.

In the rear-view mirror Sepideh saw that the Cadillac’s signal come on for a right turn and it slowed down. Instinctively, she came to a quick stop, tires skidding on the rough asphalt. The front passenger-side tire rubbed against the concrete curb making an awful scraping sound. She held her breath.

The Cadillac slowed down, but it did not stop. Instead its driver moved closer to Sepideh’s car. With trembling hands, Sepideh was about to call Bijan. The passenger window of the Cadillac slowly rolled down, pausing halfway. She couldn’t see the driver of the Cadillac very well, but she thought it might be Aziz.

A muscular, middle-aged man, with dark glasses was in the passenger seat. He looked Persian and had thick black hair and a Fu Manchu mustache. His yellow polo shirt was starkly bright in the darkness of the car.

Several tattoos decorated his bare, fat arm. With his big right hand he waved at Sepideh, but the expression on his face wasn’t friendly. Noticing the cell phone in her hand, the man rolled up the window and, in an instant, the Cadillac sped away.



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Jennifer was 5 feet and 2 inches tall, in her early thirties, and had the appearance of a little girl. Despite her girlish features, she was the best hairdresser Sepideh had ever known. After going to many salons in LA and Santa Monica, and leaving unsatisfied, she had been introduced to Jen by a friend a couple of years earlier. The first session was so wonderful that she thought she would never allow anybody else to work on her hair.

Sepideh wasn’t too fussy about her hair and certainly didn’t need to color it. But she despised the hairdressers who in every session tried to talk her into changing her hairstyle. She had a firm idea about the cut and the length of her own hair and didn’t want to be constantly advised to change it.

Jen loved Sepideh’s hair and always commented on its deep black color and luster. When combing and cutting her hair, she acted with the precision of a jeweler working on his finest creation. They both agreed that her hairstyle matched the shape of her face and its length was appropriate for the length of her neck. However, occasionally, with mutual agreement, they tried some variations to avoid monotony. A warm relationship had been forged and they had become good friends. Sepideh even tried to entice her mother to use Jen, but she was adamant about patronizing her own Persian hairdresser.

“*Dokhtar joon*, dear daughter, in my hair salon practically all the clients are Persians,” her mother would say, “and I like most of them. Every three to four weeks we all get together and it’s so nice that we don’t have to talk English.” Then, her eyes glistening with tears, she would add, “Sepideh jan, dear, I can’t tell you how much I miss my beautiful home country. Socializing with these people brings back a lot of happy memories. It also gives me a chance to get the latest scoop on what is going on in Iran.”

Sitting in the salon chair for almost 20 minutes, Sepideh could not wait to have