

RE-ENACTMENT

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Their mother bought a 17” Magnavox color television so they could all watch Ted Koppel at night. Vera was 10, Jake was 12, and their mother was lonely—a single mom. She was just as obsessed as the kids were with the daily news that wasn’t really news. She had lost weight since the divorce and her dark hair was now longer and flowing. It was clear she was eager to start dating again, but she was too enamored with the saga of her ex-husband’s internment to let go of him.

“It’s on!” she’d call. The rabbit ears on the TV would be adjusted and all three would file in around the kitchen table to stare at the glowing box on the counter. *America Held Hostage* was the name of the show, and the theme

was fairly standard: Day 245. Day 246. Day 247. And so on. Bedtime was postponed so they could watch.

“Big news today,” Ted Koppel said. But there wasn’t big news. He brought on the wife of one of the hostages, who pleaded for the return of her husband. He talked into a big black phone with an Iranian. “Do you think this will be over soon?” he asked the man. “I hope so,” the man said. The news, when it was over, was the same: Their father was gone.

Jake went a little crazy. Under the circumstances, he was excused from his usual chores and the backyard went to dirt and weeds. Their mother bought him a stack of bricks which he threw, one by one, from the far side of the yard to the patio’s edge. Vera became hallucinatory. She thought she heard her father’s voice on the radio, harmonizing deeply as he always had to “The Sounds of Silence” or “Message in a Bottle,” or offering an opinion on the day’s news. She thought she saw him, his tufts of blond hair, his long, narrow back, walking through a crowd on the mall when she and her mother trudged out shopping. Vera smelled her father’s shampoo, the woody scent that came home with him after he ran two laps around Washington Park. They still lived in the family house, an old Denver Square not far from campus, so maybe it kept some of his scent within it, an animate, lingering trace of him.

Years ago, their father brought Vera and Jake to his lecture at the university. This was back when they were a family. The lecture hall was deep and dark and full of echoes. Vera and Jake sat at the top of the hall and looked down at their father on stage, his jacket thrown over the back of a wooden chair, his glasses pushed periodically up the bridge of his nose. In his hand was a remote control that he used to whip through slides.

“And this is something you should never do in Persia,” he said, clicking the button. Behind him projected a colorful photograph of a bazaar, a man captured mid-frame launching from his bicycle, which had apparently collided with a low metal chair. “And while I feel for the gentleman in this photo, I have to confess it’s the most amazing shot I’ve ever taken!” A smattering of chuckles filled the hall. Vera squinted at the image, the blurred man flying toward a tiny, well-lit stall in a line of other well-lit stalls. She imagined the man crashing into the vases on the shelves, the bottles of perfume, the glass ashtrays. Too bad: the next stall over, full of colorful and soft looking rugs and carpets, would have been a better choice.

“Only thing more impressive than catching this image on film,” their father said, “is my *pièce de résistance*, my life’s work. Stand up, Jake! Stand up, Vera! My son and daughter, ladies and gentlemen.”

Over a hundred students turned, applauded, and smiled like they were watching a puppy nuzzle a kitten. Vera was embarrassed and elated. A

young woman wearing red lipstick gave her a grinning wink. All of these people, these grownups, had a relationship with their father. They seemed to hold genuine affection for him, and now that affection was overflowing to Vera and Jake. She felt elevated by it, soaring above the world.

“Looks like our time’s almost up, so I’ll narrate these last few on fast forward,” he said, and then laughter erupted as he sped through the slides, narrating with the perfect auctioneer’s calling voice.

From that day on, Vera pictured her father speeding through slides and talking fast every time he went to lecture, and then, after her parents divorced, she imagined him in his condo across the park, zipping through small talk with neighbors, calling to set up his visits with her mother, all with that voice that she begged him to do from that day forward. “What-voice-what-voice-this-voice? Is it this voice you-want-little-girl, the-voice-that-talks faster-than-the-faster-than-the-faster-than-the-speed-of-light?”

Their father took the post in Tehran, he said, to get over losing custody. After an eight-month battle, he finally had to accept that their mother was granted primary care and he, like so many fathers in those days, got weekends and some holidays. According to Vera’s mother, losing had hurt his pride. He had to leave. So he resigned from the university (“Absolute lunacy,” their mother said. “A tenured professor!”) and accepted a four-year

post as cultural attaché in Iran. After a year or so, he would send for Vera and Jake to visit in the summers, he said, and would return for holidays to maintain his “cordial-special-occasional relationship” with his kids.

Within a month of his arrival there, however, the embassy was attacked by students from the university. Her father was one of 66 Americans taken hostage. Over time, the number dropped to 52, the same number as cards in a deck. For the duration of his captivity, Vera’s mother tried to pass time by dealing out hands for rummy, but Vera couldn’t. She swept up her cards, added them to the top of the deck, and walked away. Not before seeing Jake and her mother exchange knowing glances at the table. Her isolation from them had already begun.

But one good thing about the number 52 was that it was smaller than 66. It gave Vera hope, a dubious one, that her father could also be released. He didn’t fit the profile of the released hostages, though, all of whom were women or black or sick. At night she would compose long, impassioned arguments for his release, arguments that would bring tears to his captors’ eyes; they would release him immediately, if only she had the chance to talk with them.

Rosalie, her best friend since Kindergarten, had been distant after the whole thing happened, walking closer to the wall’s edge on the way to class.

As if losing your father could be contagious. No longer did she save a space at lunch for Vera, who'd sit alone and rehearse her elaborate pleas to the Iranians. At recess Rosalie became newly engaged with one of the spirited troupes of jump-ropers.

Later, looking back on it, Vera would be more compassionate about Rosalie's abandonment. No one knows what to say about unthinkable loss or pain or suffering, let alone to a child. And when it's in the headlines like that, people forget that the individuals most touched by the news feel in no way buffered by the limelight. Vera felt tortured, like every cell in her body was charged with anxiety. There was nowhere for these galvanized cells to go, nothing they could do to change anything. So they ricocheted around her body, adding a motor to whatever else was there, and in her case what was there was a deep, animal unhappiness.

Reagan was elected and the hostages were to be freed. This news made the country euphoric and self-congratulatory, but Vera felt her life was even more precarious, like it could all be undone. Standing in the kitchen by the TV, her legs shook as they watched the plane land in Algiers. Those energized cells again. No, Dan Rather said, no it wasn't the plane. Yes, it was. No—it was a plane filled with Iranian diplomats. Dan Rather was her favorite, and he knew nothing, and her father was nowhere for all of those

minutes and hours. Could a person be nowhere and still be alive? The footage was rainy and dark, and the reporters and anchors took turns wasting time, speculating, talking about negotiations.

“Who gives a rip about Warren Christopher?” her mother shouted at the TV. She’d changed out of her contacts and wore her oversized, hexagonal glasses, the ones she chose to make her face look smaller.

“Is it them?” Vera said. “Are they there?”

No one responded, which didn’t strike Vera as odd. Her mother and brother were bigger, louder—the people who made things happen. She was a mouse. Her heart pounded. She tuned out the anchors and walked the linoleum tiles of the kitchen, tracing with her toes the light brown borders. She had a hard time taking in enough air. Finally her legs buckled and she fell into the chair by her mother and brother.

Vera and Jake were his masterpiece. That’s what he’d said the phrase meant, his *pièce de résistance*. If someone like her father disappeared from the world, no such love would ever come her way again. Even at ten she knew this.

The freed hostages were on the ground in Germany. They swore this time. The phone rang and it was him, but Vera couldn’t speak on her extension. Mice don’t speak. Jake and her mother filled the silence: God! I can’t believe it. Are you okay? We miss you. We miss you! She listened to the

distant voice of her father and thought of the auctioneer, the harmonizing phantoms on the radio.

Later, new footage came. The group was about to board an Air Force Boeing 707, or so said Walter Cronkite, and the camera zoomed in on her father's face by a reporter's microphone. The networks must not have had the audio, because the anchors talked over his close up, his mouth moving, words spoken that they couldn't hear. They saw the clip again and again. Her father looked not exactly thinner but ropier, more lined. His new baldness. He wore a gigantic parka, and he smiled, glowed, but there was something wrong. The same asymmetry to his face, one eye subtly larger than the other, but more exaggerated. Also: something haunted.

"He looks skinnier," her mother said.

"He looks relieved," Jake said.

Who was this man coming home to them? Vera watched his image on the television and cocked her head each way. She made a small window with her fingers, looked at him through it. He spoke into the microphone and then turned. His new face, his new face.

"He looks like a different person," Vera said.

"Those pants," her mother said. "They used to be tight."

“You’re different, Vera. You’re special.”

“How am I different?”

“You’re deeper, that’s all. You’re deeper than all the rest put together.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“And so unsentimental! I haven’t seen you cry once.”

“I have no reason. Not compared to—”

“The embassy. That godforsaken place! It already felt like a prison, a red brick prison, and then it became one.”

“—”

“The thing is, I was a sympathizer! I was going to tell them, ‘I’m with you! The Shah’s a criminal!’ Hell, I would have sold them Carter for a penny—I was completely on their side. But the minute they heard my Farsi they saw me as a risk, and off I went to solitary. So much for goddamned diplomatic immunity.

“That was day two. Day two of four hundred and forty four days. By the end, I would have eaten their eyes out if I could.”

After a four-day stay in the family home, her father was extradited again—that was his word for it—to his old bachelor condo across the park. Vera’s mother had lost her lovesickness for him. She wasn’t the only one. Within weeks, people scattered when her father entered a room. Jake took

to sports with new gusto, earning MVP in baseball, captain in soccer and tennis. His activities were a standing alibi for staying away. No one thought Vera should spend so much time with her father, so she spent more time. She was eleven, a compliant listener. She never forgot what her father had said about her depth; she wanted to believe it and spent hours burrowing in her own mind. She grew chubby and silent at school. But her silence was not acceptance, it was not meekness. She felt that so much about life was scripted to make her believe things she no longer believed. The world contracted and she felt less a part of it. She just watched.

“Vera, it’s not good for you,” her mother said. “He’s gone a little crazy, honey.”

But Vera kept going to him. She felt the shame of it, but she was also proud to be the one person who was true to him. He was ruined, though. She knew he was ruined.

Her father told the stories aerobically, acting out scenes, mimicking accents. He remembered every second of captivity. His head was narrow and striated with energetic worry. He paced the room while he spoke, speeding up when things got really interesting. “The worst part was when they took us to the basement of the Chancery. It may have been bigger, more open, but the entire place reeked of shit and piss and vomit. There were three

inches of muck that you stood in to use the john.” He lifted his legs slowly from the imagined bog in the living room. “But you couldn’t use it at all without permission from the student guards. We were treated just like little children! The toilets never flushed, and then, maybe you could step into a filthy bathtub to wash the raw sewage off your feet with brown, freezing cold water.”

A new, hesitating quality marred his speech, a sound that made her think of an animal’s growl or the stutter of a lawn mower off in the distance, but really was just the disembodiment of his voice as he searched for the right word to shape it. It was the uh-hh-hh-hh-hh-hh that you heard on the radio sometimes, interviews with people who were too thoughtful or who did not want others jumping into their pauses.

“They took us into rooms and showed us video. They uh-hh-hh-hh-hh showed us people stripped naked, getting their heads blown off, and then they’d uh-hh-hh-hh-hh strip us naked, put a cold pistol up against our necks like this.”

He pushed the mouth of an empty bottle firmly against Vera’s neck.

During recess, Vera hovered near the school building, trying to hide herself from the teachers who stood in pairs, reeking of the smoky teacher’s lounge. Sometimes a teacher would look at her and cock her head. “Why

aren't you playing with the other kids?" she'd ask. Vera would hurry off to the abandoned parallel bars, low enough to hold while she walked between them. She'd lift her body and swing her legs forward, let go, take another step and lift again. As if she were propelling herself forward on crutches. Then she'd turn around and do it all the way back again, and again, until the whistle blew.

Rosalie passed her a note, a note folded into an elaborate origami with a tab that said, Pull here. "You should go on a DIE-t," it said, the first three letters of diet underlined. She felt her insides clench and her cheeks fire up. In the old days, Jake would be there to protect her, but he was up at junior high now, and she was all alone. After school, on her way to her father's, she reminded herself that she was lucky. Her imprisonment at Erickson Elementary was painful, but it wasn't as painful as what her father endured. To survive in his prison, Vera's father depended on little acts of kindness from his jailers. A Brach's candy; the bliss of cherry pie filling spread on a stale hunk of bread.

"The problem wasn't just my captors," he assured her. "The problem was my fellow hostages! Everything for their own advantage. They'd throw me to the wolves, their conscience swept clean by misery. We were incarcerated! Why should they behave like moral beings?" After some of them turned on him, claiming he'd spoken ill of the guard they all called The

Mailman, he no longer received Jake and Vera's letters. So he thought of them back at home, and played games in his head with the letters of their names, creating words in any number of languages. Hearing this, Vera felt jealous of the daughter he'd tried to imagine, the one whose name provided him some comfort, because she was here now, and he didn't seem to notice her at all. "I would lie on my filthy bed, make sentences and translate them into all the languages I knew. I began creating my own language."

She thought back to that day in the lecture hall, her father bragging about her and Jake. She wondered if the division she felt between herself and Jake, between herself and her mother, between herself and the world, if that very division was what made him love her less, now.

She turned twelve and her father seemed better. A little.

"So do you have it yet?" he asked her one day over homemade macaroni and cheese, his specialty.

"Have what?"

"Your purpose in life? Your love? A boyfriend? Heck, a girlfriend. A hobby? A way to wear your hair? A dream?"

She let out an embarrassed laugh.

“All I want,” he said. “Is that time back. Those days. Four hundred and forty four of them. Is that too much to fucking ask? Can you get that for me, Vera?”

For the next several years, her teen years, Vera pulled away from her father. She needed to; her mother had been right. “It’s not that you don’t love him,” her mother assured her while they sorted coupons on the kitchen table. “It’s that you can’t continue to hold him up. Christ! His delusions.”

She told her mother about her latest small act of rebellion. (She couldn’t help it; her mother’s approval felt like an antidote to a new hollowness.) It happened earlier in the week, when he was re-enacting being in solitary, bound to a chair, forced to sleep on the floor. He demonstrated by crouching on the floor against the rocker, his arms uncomfortably pressed to the leg. For show, he added some struggling shimmies that got him nowhere. Once he was given a small mat, he said, to sleep on, and a blanket, but by then it was too hot to do any good. People walked through the embassy, diplomats from other countries, and looked at him like he was an animal in the zoo.

“Not a fucking one of them did anything about it, Vera,” he said, and she turned her head at the mention of her name, only to see he was looking through her somehow, to the backdrop, the stage of his play. “None of

them! They walked through and looked at us. One of the Pope's men, uh-hh-hh-hh, a fat Italian, came through and said to me, 'Pazienza.'

"Fuck your patience!" he said, and she mouthed the words. She of course knew this story. So she stood up from her spot on the couch, reached down to touch him on the shoulder, said, "I know. It was awful and I'm sorry. Goodnight, Dad," and walked out of the room.

"That's my girl," her mother said. "That's how we do it."

Vera's mother was getting remarried to a Republican rancher who Vera detested, but that was okay. School had improved. Jake's popularity made her, by extension, less of a pariah, and girls like Rosalie had entered their own awkward phases. They would kill to be associated with Jake, athlete scholar and soon-to-be-voted prom king. Mostly, Vera had matured enough to understand that in three short years she would be released from this life, from the world in which she'd still never felt like her true self. In college, away from here, she would have a do-over, she would get a chance to be free.

A few years later, Vera was indeed a new person in a new state. So free that she'd already forgotten about her previous life and would have to wait almost twenty years, when her own daughter faced the difficulties of childhood, for the past to revisit her in its full force. Her father's life? No one

remembered what happened in 1979, and she remembered it less and less. She had it tidily stowed away, in a box, on a shelf—in her mind. Tidily stowed, that is, until she met Ali.

She was a junior, just twenty, no longer a true ugly duckling though not astonishingly pretty, either. As she boarded a plane from Denver to Santa Barbara, where she went to school, she didn't think much about the young man watching her as she made her way down the aisle. It's not that he wasn't appealing, even handsome. In a way, he was. Clean cut. Short hair parted on the side, an almost jaunty intellectual look with his round, wire-rimmed glasses. He had dark hair, light brown skin—smooth, without even a freckle. It was that she disliked air travel and didn't want to have to talk. She settled in next to him, reached down to her bookbag, and sat up again, opening to page three. It had taken her three days to read three pages.

“What are you reading?” he asked. He had an accent she couldn't place. He talked just a few inches away from her ear. A tingling played at her neck.

She flipped her book over to read its title. “It's for class. Political theory.”

“Yes,” he said, inclining his head toward the book. “I know Habermas.”

“Good. Then you can explain him to me.” She meant it as a challenge and a test.

“The best way to run a democracy,” he said, “is to distract all of its citizens.” He smiled at her again. “Without letting them realize they’re distracted. There’s a crisis when the systems of distraction, like tradition, capitalism—television!—actually break down or disrupt the blind loyalty of those being governed.”

She felt an urge to laugh. “I’m suffering a crisis, then,” Vera said.

“Aren’t we all?” he said, and they quietly laughed. “So you’re not a big fan of Bush?”

She raised an eyebrow and slowly blinked, and he nodded. If only Dukakis hadn’t imploded. What a drag.

They introduced themselves. His name was Ali. It turned out they were both going to L.A. and then Santa Barbara, where he was a graduate student in physics. Eventually, their conversation lulled and she turned her attention back to Habermas. As she tried to unpack each sentence, a distraction edged into her consciousness. The smell of cologne, the kind all the boys wore that year. The plane shuddered and she clutched the armrest between them. They were crossing the frozen Rocky Mountains—always an occasion for turbulence. She watched through the corner of her eye as the wing tipped into a bank of dark clouds.

“You hate to fly, don’t you?” he said.

She nodded.

He reached over and put his hand on her arm and patted it, as if to soothe her. His nails were clean and perfectly round, the half-moons as pronounced as any she'd ever seen. The gesture gave her something to focus on. He had small, delicate bones, like a child's. In the changing light of the cabin—it flickered as they barreled through the unknown—his skin looked to be an almost olive green hue. When they finally broke free of the clouds, she looked up and he was staring into her eyes.

Vera had her new life—that much was true. She'd still never had a real boyfriend, but she figured that was because she was busy, working at the chancellor's office, going to class, studying until two in the morning, waking up to do it all again. She had some friends with whom she had no past. They laughed and tried out new ironies on each other. With her roommates and fellow political science majors, she was friendly and outgoing and, ultimately, remote.

After the plane settled down, Vera picked up Habermas again. Ali nudged her arm.

“Where do you think I'm from?” he asked.

“You said New York, right?” She often played dumb out of social oversensitivity, not wanting to presume anything about anyone.

He laughed. “No. I was visiting family there. I'm not from this country.”

“Somewhere in Europe?”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Asia?”

“Closer,” he said.

“The Middle East.”

He nodded, and still, he wasn’t telling.

“Are you Israeli?”

He shook his head no.

“Arab?”

He smiled and shook his head again.

“Then you’re from Iran.”

Ali’s smile shrank. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “You said you weren’t Arab.”

His face opened up then, as if she’d solved a riddle he’d been puzzling over for days.

Her new father, for that’s how she thought of him, was busy with a new marriage and a non-tenured post at the university. Vera had hoped that her father’s new marriage would push him gently toward centeredness, toward who he once was, but that hope quickly diminished. Over break, his wife’s inane commentary ran throughout Christmas Eve dinner. The wife

announced that she would be getting a tattoo with their father's name on it. Guess where? she'd said, badly wanting to tell them. Both Jake and Vera begged her not to go into details. It was obvious their father had found the perfect spouse. Someone as obsessed with him as he was.

“Did I tell you about the conference?” he asked her.

“Yes, Dad,” she said. It was true. He'd told her on the phone.

“Uh-hh-hh the man who ran it, a fat older guy who stomped around all week with file folders and his hairpiece like this”—her father waddled, grabbed a stack of newspaper, balanced an oven mitt on his head—“it was obvious he was jealous of me. The poster session, I don't mind saying, had people astonished, blown away, really, and he didn't like it, not at all, so he made a big production of—”

At this point, Jake sighed audibly and escaped to the family room to watch football. Out of habit or nostalgia, Vera stayed. His new monologues were peopled with heroes and villains from a different captivity, the captivity that was his day-to-day life. Time had softened him a little, she thought, or maybe she was just less irritated by it now.

Several days after winter break, Vera went out on a date with Amaury, a handsome Poli-Sci major, a Brazilian, with clear eyes and wavy hair. He took her to see the Middle East ensemble, and he sat close to her, entangled his

arm with hers. He began to whisper in her ear when Ali approached from near the stage. She sat forward, startled at seeing him, and waited for him to spot her and say hello. The ensemble was still setting up. Instead, Ali walked past her to the back of the auditorium, but when he passed he made a weird, indecipherable noise.

Amaury whispered, “Do you know him?”

“I sat with him on the plane last week,” she said. “Did you hear what he said?”

“No, I don’t think he said something in English.”

The musicians sat on the stage atop a thick blue blanket, each in front of a microphone, and began to play. A man and a woman each with a long-handled sitar, another man with a set of small drums that he hit muscularly with his palm, fingers, the heel of his hand. Vera got lost watching all of their feet, crossed over their bodies, lifting and falling in time to the beat. The music was repetitive and seemed almost to have its own pulse, and she soon found herself falling into a trance.

After half an hour, the ensemble took a break and Ali approached again, angling up the aisle. “I need to talk to you,” he said, but again he didn’t stop. Then, within seconds, she felt a light touch on her shoulder, as if someone were brushing off lint. It was Ali. He looked at her with wide, beseeching eyes, like a parent of a misbehaving child. He motioned for her to come to

him. Amaury turned at that moment, and in response, Ali smiled and changed the impatient wave to a friendly one. Pointing to Vera, he said, “Sorry. I have to talk to her a second.”

“Do you want to talk to him?” Amaury asked.

Vera lifted from her seat. “Sorry,” she said, and Amaury shrugged, his face slack and indifferent.

In the vestibule, Ali led her to an upholstered bench away from the people who’d gathered. She whispered, “What is it?”

His eyes were moist, the rims red. Even from behind his glasses, it was clear he’d been crying.

“Okay,” he said. “Here’s the thing. I met you once, on the plane, and I have not stopped thinking of you since then. I honestly feel that you’re the woman of my dreams.”

This was not at all what Vera had expected. She felt repulsed and strangely elated.

“I have never met a woman like you. I think it’s quite possible that you will be the mother of my children.”

Now Vera’s attention ticked past him to the ceiling, her ideal focal point for stunned evasion. That part. That part angered her. Almost.

“You see,” he continued, “first you know about Iranians being Persian, not Arab. And now,” he said, pointing to the doors leading back into the concert hall, “you show up at the same sitar concert? With some other guy?”

Vera couldn't argue. She'd said and done those things.

“What you don't seem to understand,” Ali said, leaning his neck forward, “is that we're meant for each other.” But as he finished the sentence, he seemed to lose heart. Perhaps he could tell she didn't feel the same way. Or didn't want to. Or didn't know.

“Please,” he said. “Please, I'm sorry. Can I have another chance?”

“It's fine, it's fine,” she said. “Don't worry about anything.”

“Are you mad at me?” His lower lip jutted out.

“I have to go back.”

“Can we have dinner?” he asked. “As friends.”

“Well,” she said, standing up. “It's tough. My brother's here.”

“He'll come, too,” Ali said. “I'd love to make dinner for you and your brother.”

They walked back into the auditorium in silence.

A week later, Vera and Jake were on their way to Ali's house. It was ten after seven and they were late. Jake had been the one who answered her

phone while she was at work. Ali had presented him with what sounded like an approved plan for dinner.

“Sorry. It sounded legit,” Jake said. He seemed amused by the whole thing. She was glad. It kept the stakes low. She’d carefully crafted her stance: this thing with Ali was an annoyance. She was a reluctant party. It was true but also false. Mother of his children, she’d said to Jake, mocking. She was invested in Jake believing she wanted nothing.

She watched him from the corner of her eye; her big brother was now suddenly a man. Barrel-chested, deep-voiced, and full of assurance—mysterious to her. They found the right address on the outskirts of Isla Vista, a complex surrounded by tall gates, just like her apartment complex about a half mile away. The cool, salty air smelled of tar from an oil spill twenty years ago. Jake entered the code Ali had given him, the gate clicked its release, and they walked in.

“Ver,” Jake said. Their footsteps echoed up the cement stairs and his voice took on a watery quality. “Where’s he from?”

She didn’t answer. They reached the landing on the second floor. Apartment 205, advertised on a dangling, faded plate, was straight ahead. Ali’s apartment was 225.

“Where do you think?” she said.

“His name’s Ali. He had an accent. Could be from anywhere over there.”

Not telling him hadn't been intentional. Yes, it had. She and Jake had been at odds during those years between their father's return and Jake's leaving home. The alienation had been camouflaged by the usual drift of adolescence, but she'd felt it deeply even if Jake never seemed to mind.

"He's from Iran," she said.

He continued forward in silence, stopping at a darkened door framed by two windows. A warm light glowed behind cheap blinds.

"Here it is." He pushed up his sleeves and drew his fist to the door, his forearm tan and rippled with muscle. Her brother belonged in Santa Barbara more than she did.

"Let's do this," Jake said, knocking.

As they waited, she wondered what he meant.

There was interference, that's how she thought of it. A generalized static. Somehow she'd just assumed she'd stumble onto herself. But when she tried to imagine a future, fuzzy threads of her past wove in, pulling her to the image on the television, the hesitation in her father's voice. Cherry pie filling on stale bread.

Had she been ruined? Could she ever be like Jake and return to the normal world? She wanted to see it as a legitimate world and to be in it.

Ali opened the door just as Jake finished the third knock. He made a point of welcoming Jake first. Ali looked even tinier next to Jake's tall, stocky frame. Jake shook his hand with gusto, and in return Ali gave a strange, demure bow forward, as if he were Japanese. Eagerness tugged at the structure of his otherwise placid mouth. He had a wide forehead and a pointy chin, his face dominated by the wire-rimmed glasses. Finally, he pivoted to Vera and his cheeks warmed. They embraced in a light and formal way.

The sizzle of garlic and onions brought Vera a pang of hunger. She realized Ali was a source of such confusion for her—what she told herself about him, what she told her brother and Ali himself—that she'd not even considered he was cooking real food for them. There was a world of fact and a world of perplexity. The fact of the food smelled delicious.

"Come in, friends," Ali said, extending his arm to his apartment. It was shabby like hers, decorated with an eclectic sparseness—brown thrift store couch, colorful wall hangings and a dark orange throw over the sitting chair. The table was covered with a pristine tablecloth, mismatched silverware fanned out on paper napkins, and, in the center, a set of gaudy candlesticks in ornate chunky holders. Ali angled in with his lighter just as Vera's gaze landed there. His hosting was virtuosic.

He moved into the small kitchen. All of the burners were occupied by covered pots and pans. A gigantic spice rack sat on one counter and a rice steamer on the other.

“You must be warm blooded,” Ali said. He indicated Jake’s shorts and sandals as he handed him and Vera tumblers of ice water. “I hope it’s okay—I don’t have alcohol.”

The siblings nodded, although they both drank freely. Maybe even copiously. Ali turned down all of the burners and they followed him into the living room, where the boys sat on the couch, and Vera took the chair with the orange throw.

“So,” Jake said. “Where in Iran are you from?”

Vera gently shook her ice water. Being a mouse was familiar—just being around Jake brought back the feeling. It was okay. Her inner disruption was invisible. She hoped.

“Tehran,” Ali said, smiling. “Where else?”

Jake sat on one end of the couch. Light creases around his eyes and mouth made him appear genial, eager to connect. He glanced over at Vera for a moment, and she feigned fascination with the ice cubes in her glass.

Ali told the story of coming to New York from Tehran six years ago for undergrad, then choosing UCSB for graduate school after seeing pictures of a campus surrounded by ocean. She had come here for similar reasons, to be

far away from the mountain state where she'd lived all her life. Southern California was a place where no one knew her, where no one knew.

“And what about you?” Ali said, full of good humor. “What brought you here? Don't tell me it's the coeds in bikinis!”

Jake described being in limbo, having to be ready for a Peace Corps placement on a moment's notice. He couldn't tolerate living in the basement of his mother's or father's house. Vera's roommate was off on study abroad but had prepaid four months of rent so she wouldn't lose her place, and Jake felt the call to be here before shipping off to Africa or South America or wherever he might be placed.

“Your family is amazing,” Ali said, flushed with appreciation. “Your sister in this place is unusual—she knows about politics and doesn't care about fashion or tans! But you, too, taking the best of the country and sharing it.”

Jake smiled. “That's what you're doing, too, right?”

“I suppose so, buddy.” Ali grinned and stood to tend the food in the kitchen.

Could a person's insides be so unsettled by lies and omissions that they truly smoldered? The feeling reminded Vera of those hours when her father's plane couldn't be tracked, not even by Dan Rather, and how she trembled

down to the cellular level. She was trying to walk away from her inner smoldering.

There was no investment in Ali. He was crazy. He said “mother of my children.” He was little. He was presumptuous. Why did she care if it all came out, her failure to be straight with him? Her past. Did she care because of what might happen with Jake, or did she care because of what might happen with Ali? Or was it something else altogether?

The stew tasted of garlic, onions, an unfamiliar spice, and dill, and it was ladled over white rice. It was unlike anything she’d ever tasted. Jake’s cheeks were rosy. He ate heartily, leaning into the table.

“I still can’t believe your sister,” Ali said, for this was the topic he really wanted to stay on all along. He watched them enjoy their food. He’d given himself a smaller portion and still, most of it was left on his plate. He recounted to Jake her guessing game on the plane. “Has she always been so worldly and smart?”

On Jake’s face appeared something Vera quickly recognized. A competitiveness (he was the smarter of the two; it had been proven in the multiple IQ tests they took during the custody hearings) and maybe fear. Was he, too, afraid of hauling the whole story out in front of a stranger? Something that couldn’t be predicted because by choice or laziness or

default they'd not mentioned it to each other for nearly ten years? Yes, of course. Something about this random combination of circumstances made disclosure inevitable.

Jake said, "We know about Iran. It's a family...tradition, I guess you could say."

Ali cocked his head with polite interest. At the same time, concern began lowering itself into the room. This evening couldn't have been going better for Ali up to now.

"What do you mean," Ali asked, blinking, a smile still playing around his eyes, "by family tradition?"

"Our father," Jake said, putting down his fork, "was there. For a couple years."

Ali paused, looked with surprise at Vera. How had this not come out on their shared flight from Denver to L.A., then L.A. to Santa Barbara? How had it not come out when he pulled her aside and confessed his feelings at the Middle East Ensemble, or the few occasions when he'd surprised her by meeting her after class?

"Your father was in Iran?" He laughed without smiling. "When?"

Jake leaned back in his chair, tucked his napkin under his plate. It was agreed the answer would come from him. "Late '78 to early '81."

Ali put down his fork. "Your father—"

“You bet,” Jake said. “You got it.”

But why would she have told Ali? She never told anyone, not anymore, and it's not like they were friends, really. She didn't want anything from him. Right? He was the one, through his job in student services, who learned her schedule, her phone number. Vera thought of the few men she'd dated. Entanglements always finished off with heartbreak—hers or theirs—but all of them felt like compromises. She supposed that's what love was all about. Amaury, the boy from the ensemble concert, had confessed he had a Dutch girlfriend and that he really only wanted to have sex—for spiritual reasons. That was how things went for her. She'd never allowed herself to seriously consider dating Ali, but watching his face, she was struck that she could read it in a very close and intimate way. She'd found herself wishing he was older or truly ugly or gay. Why? She wanted two things at once: safety and love. The safety came from remaining aloof, the love from whatever power she seemed to hold over him. In other words, she wanted to keep hold of his enchantment.

Meanwhile, the information was settling. Ali was moving through confusion to awareness, and in between he stopped on the edge of something. Doubt.

“But how could this be?”

Jake smiled mechanically. “Bad luck. He was there. When it happened.”

“But how would he? Where were you?”

“With our mother, back in Denver. They were divorced.”

The candles on the table were burning down, and Vera reached out to take some of the hot maroon wax on her fingertips, an old habit. Her throat ached. Everything was warped. She’d learned on the plane that Ali, until just a few years ago, had to wonder if the apartment where his own mother and sister lived was getting bombed by the Iraqis back in Tehran, and Vera sat here pitying herself over nothing. That was no way to be.

As understanding came to Ali, his eyebrows rose up slightly and his attention zeroed in even deeper on Vera. A shot of fear moved through her as she decided Ali must know of her being ruined. But what she saw in his eyes, behind his glasses, was something else. A maddening warmth. He reached up and held his hand to his own heart and tapped it there, and in return, Vera did something unforgiveable. She cried.

The rest of the night was awful in the same way.

Jake and Ali didn’t know what to do, so Ali leapt up and retrieved a box of tissues. He placed it in front of her at the table. Then he returned with figs and mugs of chai, which Vera couldn’t touch. Then he put a hand on her arm, the same calming gesture from the plane, but still she cried, made it worse

by attempts to laugh it off. Finally, he moved back in his chair, and with Jake, continued the evening, talking of soccer and a novel they'd both read. They tried, charitably, to ignore her tears, the tears dropping from her face to the table, and the insufficiency of the tissues, which disintegrated in her hands. She willed herself to stop; mice don't cry. It's too noisy. She thought to get up and go to the bathroom, but she couldn't. She didn't know why.

It was late, so Ali and Jake stood up. Vera followed. She was raw. At the door, Ali shook Jake's hand, and Jake, perhaps in compensation for Vera, seemed to never have been so pleased to have met someone. Boy, had they been through it together, their shared look said. Or so was her interpretation. Vera accepted a hug from Ali, and when their bodies touched—his slight and brittle embrace—she could feel it, an erotic pulse. When they came apart, she could see that just as she suddenly felt it, he no longer did.

“Be good, Vera,” he said. “Take care.”

And she nodded, turned to see Jake's back; he was waiting for her at the stairs. When she walked shakily out the door toward him, she heard Ali's door close gently.

“That was amazing, sister,” Jake said breezily, his arm thrown over her shoulder. “Almost like it was on cue.”

That was the meanest thing anyone had ever said to her, and she turned on him, to yell or push him. But then she saw a somber shadow cross his face. He was envious.

“After all these years,” he said. “What did you think of to make you cry?”

She didn’t know. “Just all of it, I guess.”

The bricks in the yard, she remembered. The sports, the striving, the action. All of that and Jake still hadn’t gotten past it. That’s what his look said. But he was confused. Crying didn’t mean anything. She had not gotten past it, either, and never would, not even if she cried for the rest of her life.

“Not one single thing?” he said. “Nothing?”

The answer wouldn’t have made sense to Jake. It was the way Ali looked at her, the way he touched his heart.

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