In the Walled Gardens

In the Walled Gardens

a novel

ANAHITA FIROUZ

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Q-MART

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For my daughter and my son,

Anousha & Amir-Hussein

The dust of many crumbled cities
settles over us like a forgetful doze,
but we are older than those cities.
. . . . . .
and always we have forgotten our former states. . . .

Maulana Jalaleddin Rumi

I would like to thank the Library of Congress, especially for making available the microfiches I requested from the *Iranian Oral History Project* (Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard). Of all my research, these unpublished interviews with a number of political dissidents active before the 1979 revolution were invaluable primary sources. I would also like to acknowledge the Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh.

This story and all its characters are entirely fictional, belonging to a vanished world.

A special thanks to Dan Green and Simon Green, and Judy Clain at Little, Brown.

Principal Characters

THE MOSHARRAF FAMILY

Mahastee, *married to* Houshang Behroudi,
with two young sons: Ehsan *and* Kamran

Nasrollah, *her father*

Najibeh, *her mother*

Kavoos, Ardeshir, *and* Bahram, *the three older brothers*

Tourandokht, *the old nanny*

THE NIRVANI FAMILY

Reza, *the son, a Marxist revolutionary*

Hajji Alimardan, *his father, deceased, once overseer of the Mosharraf family estates*

Shaukat ol-Zamon, *his mother*

Zarrindokht (Zari), *the daughter,*
married to Morteza Behjat, *with three children*

JALAL HOJJATI, *a radical revolutionary, a friend of Reza's*

THE BASHIRIAN FAMILY

Kamal, *the father, a civil servant and a colleague of Mahastee's*
Peyman, *his son, a university student*

Prologue

THE WHITE JASMINE WAS in bloom. Blossoms were gathered in silver bowls throughout the rooms, and the scent had taken possession of the house. That night, Mother said, summer would be celebrated with a dinner party on the back veranda. They'd strung up the paper lanterns, their orbs swaying in the evening breeze. From my bedroom window upstairs I watched the garden, the curve of flower beds, the gardeners spraying the lawns, fans of water arcing out at sunset.

Dinner would be late. My brothers were having their friends, and I was having mine. At quarter to eight, Father, immaculately dressed, came out in the upstairs hall and settled down to read yet another version of the rise and fall of our history. Mother was fretting downstairs, orchestrating our life as usual. She called out to my brothers to bring the stereo system out into the garden.

My three brothers, not married yet, went out often with a lot of girls and brought many of them home. That summer of my sixteenth year, I watched them go out into the world and I watched

them return. Always triumphant. I couldn't decide if it was their freedom that made them that way, or the privilege and certainties of home. I believed in never letting on how much I knew, preserving power. And secretly I longed to see my life ravaged so I could see it rise up again from its own ashes — a riveting thought.

I went out into the hall dressed in ivory muslin and pearls for dinner. A manservant ran halfway up the stairs to make a hurried announcement.

"Sir, madame says it's Hajji Alimardan! He's here with his son! They're waiting in the living room."

Father, breaking into a smile, said, "What a splendid surprise." My pulse raced. Reza was back for the first time. I hadn't seen him in two years.

We descended, Father telling me as usual how much he missed Hajj-Alimardan, how he'd never understand why Hajj-Ali had suddenly left his services, the properties and gardens he once oversaw now in decline. How he had been not just an overseer but a confidant, a friend.

They were in the living room with their backs to us when we entered.

"Hajj-Ali!" Father said, and they turned.

Our fathers shook hands with long-seated affection. Reza, even taller than when I'd last seen him, looked me over, then nodded. His father still had that strange mixture of rectitude and kindness but looked pale and surprisingly aged. His eyes were misty, like my father's as he embraced Reza.

"How are you, my son? Look at you, a man now! How old are you?"

I knew. He was sixteen; he and I had also known each other a lifetime.

Hajj-Ali had come on a private matter. I suggested to Reza a walk in the gardens, and we left, passing through the back doors to the veranda. We stepped out, the evening revealing itself in a hush.

He saw the tables set with white tablecloths and turned, pride darkening his wide-set eyes, the angles of his clean-shaven face shifting with the light. We went left up the gravel path toward the arbors, my ivory dress whiter at dusk, like a bride's. He didn't say a word. When we got to the trees, he turned.

"You haven't changed much," he said.

I smiled. "You thought I'd got bigheaded? That's why you never visit?"

"Tonight Father insisted."

I wanted to ask him why they'd left that summer so suddenly, but looking at him now, I knew he wouldn't tell. I knew he was stubborn, reticent, unwavering, that he kept secrets with tenacity and vision.

"You look nearly old enough to be married," he said.

"This autumn I'm going away to study in England," I said defiantly.

"Of course, England. Isn't it good enough staying here?"

"It's what we've all done."

Suddenly he smiled. "Then what?"

"Then I'll come back, of course."

Behind the wall of cypress, we turned into the greenhouse. Passing through the potted orange and lemon trees, he stopped.

"I think Father is gravely ill," he said.

I flinched. I thought of Hajj-Ali as blessed and immortal. He said his father was at the doctor's constantly for his heart. We wended our way out and to the far side of the rose garden. I asked about his school. He named a public school. It was a rough place and had gangs. "We're into politics," he said, his jaw setting suddenly with this. Voices rose from the veranda, laughter, then someone put on a record. A slow, dreamy summer love song.

He stared at the trees. "You have guests. You should go back."

"Remember when I taught you to dance?"

"That was another life."

He said it with a quiet anger, then stared at me, the anger plucked away, his eyes searching my face. The hum of cicadas rose to a throbbing around us, the leaves above shivering with a breeze that ruffled my dress and hair. He hovered in the shadows for a moment, then stepped in close. He bent down and, gripping me, pressed his lips to my mouth with a quiet urgency, then a crushing force, and I felt shaken as if given desire and elation and life forever.

Emerging through the trees to the sweep of lawns, we saw in the distance the house rising, the veranda draped in flowering wisteria, the spectacle of guests under lanterns. We hovered like phantoms at this distant border, and I thought, That's what we are, he and I, a separate world.

"Look! Safely back where you belong," he said.

We came up along the side of the house. Mother, presiding over her guests, saw us and followed us with her gaze, watching to see if I would give anything away. She pointed over to my friends. The boys eyed Reza with that who's-he, he's-not-one-of-us look. The girls smiled and made eyes at him. He slipped past them and whispered to me that he had to leave, his father was waiting.

We found him in the library alone.

"Hajj-Ali, you must stay for dinner!" I said.

"It's getting late. I get tired quickly," he said. "We must go."

Father reappeared and gave Hajj-Ali a large and thick sealed envelope, and we accompanied them to the door. I rushed back to the veranda.

Mother came up and whispered to me, "You look ashen. As if you've seen a ghost. The climate in England will do you good."

The moon was up, and when the music rose and I was asked to dance, I turned, looking down the lawns at the immense shadow of trees.

ONE

I SAW HER for the first time after twenty years, at an afternoon concert of classical Persian music in the gardens of Bagh Ferdaus. It was an outdoor concert in early autumn. Summer still lingered, the leaves of the plane trees and walnuts brown and withering at the edges. The sky was overcast, threatening rain, the afternoon unusually muggy. She wore yellow, the color of a narcissus from Shiraz. I knew it was her in a split second even after all those years.

The bus had taken forever all the way from downtown. As we crawled north, the mountains loomed closer and closer. The traffic on Pahlavi Avenue was terrible, even worse when we reached Tajreesh. Two friends who work at the National Television were waiting outside the gate with tickets. Abbas gave me one and we rushed in. He's grown a beard recently to go with his political leanings.

"Classy affair, isn't it?" he said, pointing.

"It's going to rain."

"Lucky you didn't have to park," said Abbas.

We walked past the pavilion — a Qajar summer palace — and down the lawns to the concert, which had already started. There was a crowd and all the chairs were taken, so we stood. Two television cameramen with headsets were recording the event, black cables snaking by their feet. I watched the old trees at the periphery of the garden and listened to the music. The *santour, kamancheh, nay,* the *tonbak.* My friends wandered and talked. They hadn't come for the music. When the concert was over, they introduced me to colleagues who were making a film on old monuments. We strolled back up to the pavilion and stood under the porch, looking out to the gardens. That's when I saw her coming up the lawns, the yellow of her suit conspicuous in the crowd, her face unmistakable. She was talking to friends, and a sudden gust of wind ruffled their clothes. When they left her, I saw an opportunity and was happy that she'd come alone. Then two dapper men stopped her to talk, and the three of them drew together as if conferring. From that distance it looked serious.

"Coming?" Abbas asked me.

"I'll see you by the entrance."

"Who's the woman?"

I shrugged and they left to get the car. I whipped around and saw her standing by a sapling, and she seemed distracted, suddenly distressed. A light rain began to fall and she looked up, squinting, her hair falling back, slithering, let loose, still a deep brown like chestnuts. Nothing had really changed her in twenty years.

I wanted to go forward and say, Remember me? Reza Nirvani. Son of Hajji Alimardan, overseer of your father's estates. I knew she would.

The sky thundered, an eerie color; then suddenly there was hail. The garden turned gray and menacing, shrouded by hailstones the size of bullets. She came running in under the roofed porch, her hair and face wet, now just a few feet away from me.

Her eyes, hazel, familiar, were scanning a limited horizon, but she didn't see me. The crowd pressed in, keeping us apart. She dropped her program, shook her hair, leaned against the white wall, and took off her shoes, legs still slightly tanned from the long summer, toenails vivid red. The television crew jostled past us with bulky equipment. People made a dash for the gate, scrambling into cars. I waited, though I knew I'd lost the moment. Now just a handful of people remained under the porch, the hail pounding into the lawns.

I stood by a column, at right angles to her. She looked out with an expression of alarm, even dread, as if gripped by something terrible. Knowledge, premonition?

"What an afternoon!" the caretaker said next to her.

"Inauspicious," she said, barely audible.

Then she picked up her shoes and headed for the gate. I followed her, her feet weaving past puddles until she put on her shoes by the gate. She crossed by the grocery store, got into a car in the side street, lit a cigarette behind the wheel, and just sat there smoking. Her windows fogged up. I'd heard she had a wealthy husband and two children. I stood waiting for my friends, the last to leave.

Evening fell with the streets washed down, the pavement glistening like coal. Summer was finally over.

TWO

I GOT IN BEHIND the wheel and threw my heels in the back and lit a cigarette. I could have sworn a man was watching me from the other side of the street. Now I was getting paranoid. Whoever it was got into the backseat of a navy blue Peykan that swerved down Pahlavi. I rolled down the window, dragged on the cigarette, fretted with the gold lighter Houshang had given me. My husband always gives me expensive presents when he gets back from abroad. He thinks I suspect nothing as long as I enact the role he's deemed suitable for me and let him conduct life as he pleases. I count his failings like darts on a board.

Bagh Ferdaus. What a name, Garden of Paradise. Grandeur and peace. Perfect for an afternoon concert. The green lawns freshly cut, fragrant, with folding chairs in a semicircle. The event televised and well attended. Music rising to gray skies, the afternoon warm, oppressive. It was too late in the summer really for

wearing yellow; I should have worn something else. Yellow looked jarring under gray skies and hail. Yellow was definitely out of place.

I shook hands with them after the concert. They were so matter-of-fact that anyone watching would have thought we were discussing music instead of dismal information. I had mentioned the private matter to them at a luncheon two weeks before, telling neither Houshang nor Father. Father hasn't much influence left and Houshang only uses his for business. He doesn't like to get involved in matters of conscience. So there we were, the three of us on the lawns, cordial and diffident. What a place for a conversation about the secret police, in the Garden of Paradise. But bad taste reigns these days. They're always cordial at first because of Father. "And how's Mr. Mosharraf? Please give him my very best." Why don't they do it in person? Father isn't fashionable to call on anymore; he's one of the has-beens they've shelved. How did they put it after that? Succinctly. "That's all they'll say. Don't ask more questions." Why not? A country without questions is a land of indifference. They don't even hear the questions.

I rolled down the window for more air. What could I tell Mr. Bashirian? Your son's in Komiteh Prison. They reserve the right to keep the boy, the right to detain him without a defense lawyer, a trial. The right to imprison him, burying him in a cell. His mother died years ago when he was a child. His father wants to leap to the ends of the earth to get him. He wept when he told me, put his face in his hands and wept. To my shame, I sat watching him woodenly. He's just a student. What do they think he'll do? Blow up the army base at Doshan Tappeh, gun down a general? They're paranoid, shrouded in secrecy and hunting shadows. It's their own shadow they should be afraid of.

Dusk at the foot of mountains. I felt them pressing in, looming. We were invited to an embassy dinner and I'd be late. I sat in the car, watching people going in and out of the grocer's. Pedestrians

buying provisions for dinner, children dragged along by flustered parents into backstreets. I thought of my two sons, sheltered. . . . I stayed in the car, waiting. The streetlights came on and I felt the ground being swept away from under me. Music, grandeur, assurance, composure, all gone. There was nothing to hold on to.

The hailstorm, like an omen, beating down suddenly. Standing there under the pavilion, I felt the premonition. Looking up at the sky, I saw it huddled, livid, and knew we'd all have to pay.

GUESTS CIRCULATED THROUGH enormous rooms. Hors d'oeuvres were being passed around, but by the looks of it there weren't many left. Dinner would be announced at any moment. Houshang loved to make an entrance, his pretty face suffused with a sudden flush for being invited, for being permitted to keep such company. They love him, he's charming and sociable, he's good for business. But he was very annoyed with me for being late.

They had rounded up the usual bunch, and the powerful were holding court. Mrs. Sahafchi, the wife of the wealthiest man in the capital, and her pampered daughter reigned in Saint Laurent like most every other woman in the room. Tiny waistcoats and ballooning sleeves and bright skirts in taffeta with cummerbunds. Tribal costumes at the embassy? The West sells back Eastern ideas to us at one thousand times the price. It's not our ideas we like so much as their labels. Wives exhaust their husbands' bank accounts around their necks and ears and wrists and fingers. I felt the twinge, not of envy, but of regret. We've turned into the handmaidens of opulence.

Embassy parties are dull. We're on the B-plus list, though Houshang wants to make the A list the fastest way possible. He knows how. I think these parties are held so foreigners can gather information. They're really here for oil and gas and coal and minerals and strategic points. To secure border stations to eavesdrop on

the Soviet Union. To sell arms and fighter jets and bring in the giant tentacles of their conglomerates. They need to boost their sagging economies, all the while gathering statistics. That way they get to lecture us.

Thierry Dalembert, a French banker, threw his arms out before me. *"Ma-has-tee!"* he exclaimed with admiration, embracing me. He wanted gossip about Mrs. Sahafchi's daughter, whispering about how long it would take him to seduce her. I told him he didn't stand a chance. They were keeping her on ice.

His blue eyes glistened. "Who's the lucky man?"

"He's being perfected by God!"

He laughed, exhilarated, quite certain he was nearly perfect himself.

"You look bored," he said craftily.

He seized the last two glasses of champagne from a passing silver tray and offered me one. The embassy, known for stinginess, was splurging. They were drumming up business. These were intoxicating times.

"What's new?" Thierry said.

"I could ask you the same."

"Houshang wants this port like nothing I've ever seen before."

Thierry wanted gossip about the Bandar Kangan project on the Gulf. He hadn't managed to talk to Houshang yet. There are major projects worth billions of dollars coming up along the Persian Gulf. The commercial port on the island of Gheshm, the naval port at Chah-Bahar, the expansion of Bandar Abbas. But recently we've had sudden government cutbacks in expenditures, with grand projects like my husband's new port teetering in the balance. Houshang's company, in a joint venture with a British firm, is the general contractor for Bandar Kangan, an expensive port by the old coastal town of Kangan, with its dusty palms and fishing boats and distinctive architecture, three hundred miles from the port of Bushehr. But will it ever get finished? Houshang dismisses such questions.

Kangan is a dream project. "The navy wants it!" he keeps saying. Like Houshang, the military always gets what it wants.

Thierry was courting us. We were his designated couple from the in crowd, always invited to his elegant dinner parties at his home in Sa'adabad. He wants us to meet his big boss from Paris, due to arrive in Tehran a little before the official state visit of the president of France. I've heard Thierry and Houshang chuckling about Paris. Maybe he wants to wine and dine my husband there, taking him to the best nightclubs so he can whisper about business in Iran, lucrative contracts, insider favors, kickbacks to an account in Zurich. He could even foot the bill for the most exclusive call girls of Europe. Not that my husband needs help there. Everyone watches a man for his weaknesses.

Thierry offered me a cigarette. He'd turned sullen. He dislikes women who don't talk, who don't shed words like clothing, and leave him in the dark. I smiled when I realized how he could prove useful to me.

Houshang was deep in conversation with the ambassador and two ponderous men. Things were going swimmingly, I could tell. We'd make the A list any day now; Houshang can't think of anything better.

We were called in to dinner.

I took Thierry's arm and whispered, "Be patient."

He beamed, thinking his charisma had overcome yet another obstacle. He would boast to his compatriots about seducing the exotic locals. Exotic was everything distant that they didn't understand, nor ever really planned to. But he possessed worldly charms and wit and a magnificent education. They'd sent us their very best. I like him.

The problem with most foreign men is that they're too blond and too rapacious. They think they can rule the world. Dollars and francs and pounds and marks bobbing in their eyes instead of pupils.

THE ROADS WERE DARK and quiet all the way to Darrous. Houshang drove fast, not completely sober.

We'd stopped off at the Key Club after the embassy with the group from London. "It's important to impress them," Houshang whispered to me after dinner. "They're already impressed!" I said. "Especially by all the money they stand to make." But Houshang wasn't listening.

He cosseted them at the club, plying them with drinks and flamboyant attention. He danced and talked to their wives as if they were promising starlets and he the great director. And the wives giggled, fugitives from the confines of their dull European lives and the doldrums of marriage. Houshang introduced them to his good buddies, squished together at adjacent tables, who more than obliged, laughing the night away with them, all hung up about foreign blond women. Their husbands — anchored to their Greco-Latin pedestals — pulling loose their ties in dark corners, ogled Eastern women ten times more alluring than their wives, dreaming of how to satisfy their whims in exotic places and run back to Europe.

It's so nice to have a country everyone loves coming to. You'd think we're adored! You'd think we're the center of the world.

The house was dark, only a light on in the hall upstairs. I looked in on the children. Rumpled hair, fluttered breaths, pudgy cheeks on pillows. My sons, sovereign in my heart. In our bedroom we went about undressing without conversation. These days we feel more compelled to talk to others. We don't even regret it. I wanted to read and Houshang wanted to sleep. After thirteen years, if nothing else, we have our habits.

"We were late for the embassy," he said irritably.

"How's the port coming along?"

"I'm proud of my efforts. They've finally paid off."

"Your port is going to destroy the town of Kangan."

"It's going to drag that sleepy old place into the twentieth century!"

"Thierry didn't get a chance to talk to you tonight."

"The leech wants introductions! Let him learn to suck up properly."

I was tempted to tell Houshang about Mr. Bashirian's son, stashed away in some dark cell at Komiteh Prison. I wanted him to suck up to a rear admiral or one of his influential contacts and ask them to look into the matter. But he wasn't going to make waves, now or ever.

"Mahastee," he said in bed, before turning over, "I want to tell you something."

I thought he meant about intimacy, affection, our life together. How we'd grown apart that year. We hadn't been close in months; I wouldn't let him touch me. I began to consider how much to forgive him.

His head hit the pillow. "Forget all that intellectual bullshit you go in for. This is no time for anything to go wrong for me. Understand?"

Houshang can be uncannily prescient.

I walked down the hallway to the upstairs study, pulled up a book, but never turned on the light. I left the book on my lap and lit a cigarette and smoked in the dark. The prospect of boredom together was lifting. Houshang and I were developing an appetite for war. He'd turned out like the rest of them, taking the smallest unexpected idea as an absolute attack on all conventions. The dictates of his ambition clouded his vision, requiring you to agree with him wholesale. Otherwise you were intellectual, which meant you'd succumbed, subscribing to and awash in some suspicious ideology. A dissident, according to such irrational rules, before you even knew it yourself.

THREE

I WOKE UP at five-thirty as usual. The sun wasn't up yet, but the birds were singing under the roof. At that hour I'm especially thankful I'm a bachelor and live alone and I have peace and quiet. I closed the window, the one facing the back alley, then washed and shaved and set my bedroll against the wall.

I made tea, not on the samovar but on the kettle crowned by the teapot with pink roses Mother gave me. We bought it in Lalehzar, with all my dishes and cups and saucers. I said, "Mother, why get me a teapot with roses?" She said, "That's all they sell and this is the country of the rose and nightingale." Father adored her until the day he died. I think he still adores her beyond the grave. She knows it — I see it in her eyes.

I had hot tea and rolled up pieces of bread with feta cheese for breakfast. I listened to the radio, reread between mouthfuls the revised statement of purpose for our underground group at the end of the month. I edited and scrawled in the margins, expounding on

our main themes — the right of self-expression, the dignity of democratic freedoms, political pluralism. I inserted sentences here and there to underscore our purpose — how we intellectuals of the Left want to liberate the present from the past once and for all. We want to see the collapse of this dictatorship, a world of endless decrees, obsolete political patterns, and paternalistic interventions. We want a constitutional democracy with independent political institutions. And a parliament and political parties elected and willed by the people and representing them, instead of authoritarian royal directives and rigged elections. We want to stir up the masses by giving them a political education and objective. We believe that imperialism — the age-old adversary and economic exploiter of the Third World — is wheedling and coercing this regime, its willing servant, to keep us beholden and dependent. And that capitalism, with its cunning distortions and ferocious bravado, is working its ways to repress the inevitable — class warfare. We want to show how this regime's power is primarily bluster. Its show of strength, vast resources, machinery of state, pitted against our determination and our tenaciousness.

I poured another glass of tea. There were only three cubes of sugar left. Habib *agha*'s grocery store downstairs supplies me with most things. I will tell him that the cheese he got from Tabriz this month is particularly good. He's a decent man but barely makes ends meet with all those children.

At seven I hit the pavement. Mashdi Ahmad, the local sweeper, swept the sidewalk. He's so thin his shabby cotton trousers are several sizes too large for him, and he's bowlegged, with a funny way of sidestepping when he sweeps. If it weren't for his olive skin and sunken eyes and bony cheeks, he'd be Charlie Chaplin. Mashd-Ahmad, the Charlie Chaplin of Iran! His mother is very ill and I dared not ask this morning.

I greeted him and said, "It's a fine day."

"Whatever you say," he said, and kept on sweeping.

I have under an hour to walk to work. I go through Lalehzar, past the fruit and fish markets of Estanbul Street, and on past cinemas and cafés and barber shops and photography studios and dance studios and bookstores and stationery shops and tailors and jewelers and curious tiny stores going sideways. I like to chat with the street vendors and shopkeepers. Afternoons they call me in for a glass of tea, especially the money changers and rug dealers on Ferdausi. By day I work as a civil servant. The Department of Educational Affairs for the Provinces is affiliated with the Ministry of Education. Our section was moved up recently from Ekbatan Avenue to a new high-rise of concrete and glass in midtown with a guard at the door and steel desks and several new divisions. I take home twenty-two hundred tomans a month. Evenings I teach night school in Moniriyeh, and late nights I'm part of a Marxist underground organization.

Mother longs for me to find a wife, but I don't want to be accountable to a woman. Mine is an uncertain life. Years of clandestine activity have hardened me. Sooner or later my politics will land me in jail. All political parties have been banned for years and now there's only one party, decreed by the state.

Mother lives with my sister. Zari has three small children and a stingy and insufferable boor who calls himself her husband. He's loud and reeks of vodka on the rare occasion he comes to see me. He's a lowly functionary in the Ministry of Post and Telegraph, not that he'd ever admit it. Now that he's got a car, he's got a nasty habit of swerving down the road as he drives and laughing like a lunatic. I know he sees whores. One day I will get him. We should never have given Zari away to such pretentious people and instead should have sent them packing — the Behjat family — the day they came to ask for her hand in marriage. She was only nineteen and thought he somehow fit into the love poetry she leafed through in her bedroom. His whole family came for tea. Morteza, the apple of their eye, came hosed down with cologne, hair swept back, with

a garish tie and a lecherous smile. He couldn't wait to get his hands on my sister. He left his polished shoes by the door, eyeing them as if he were afraid we'd steal them. Zari was so nervous she noticed nothing. His mother and sisters sat to one side primly, nibbling on Mother's homemade almond rolls and baklava and walnut cookies and sweet fritters as if they were sprinkled with poison, surveying our rooms and silver and rugs and samovar and dishes, taking inventory. As if Mother didn't notice. Father was the very picture of discretion as usual. He'd never believed in accumulating worldly goods and instead contemplated the interior life, prayed on an old, faded rug, and read far into the night. Ferdausi, Attar, Maulana, the Constitutional Revolution, agricultural tracts, the precepts of the first disciple — the Perfect Man — Ali. My father was a lion in the wilderness of a desert; Ali, the Lion of God.

For years I taught mathematics in a public high school for boys. Every day was a battle, but I enjoyed their humor and directness. I valued their disrespect gathering steam beneath that eternal veneer of obedience, their insolent tauntings and undiluted politics. These were the minds that would dare think instead of doing as they were told. This was the force necessary to build the future. I got them all before they could become sellouts. Before their inevitable concessions would soften them up, make them jowly conservatives, neutered by government handouts and scholarships and promotions and international conferences. I believed in them, understood them, before they got smothered by the state or the hallowed fears sown and harvested in their souls by religion. Some we tracked, eventually recruited and trained, and then sent out to recruit others their own age. Only the young make revolution.

Then I shifted to a private high school and for two years I watched the lambkins of the privileged and their parents. It will take more than rich fathers to make men out of these boys. They're given the hollow arrogance and false assurances of their social class and believe in nothing but themselves, all soft and pampered.

It only confirmed what we already suspected. If they are the future of the Right, then we on the Left can defeat them. Paper tigers, they will go up in smoke one day.

When I applied for an opening in the Ministry of Education, I got this job. The department is in charge of all the educational needs of the provinces: policy, budgets, curriculum and textbooks, recruiting teachers, leasing buildings. Now I can evaluate civil servants. We have meetings with other divisions and we're sent for official visits to the provinces. I talk to colleagues and listen to their disaffection and unremitting cynicism about the higher-ups who run the country. Their most virulent ridicule these days is directed at our new single party — Rastakhiz. One thing they know is how to undercut everything. They whisper that the regime is losing its bearings. It has lost touch. They talk about their dreams of getting rich and moving to Los Angeles. Of their friends who are doing so well in business. Meanwhile they keep their government salary and benefits and pension and free milk and education for their children, then cut work and slink away to private jobs in the early afternoon, making fast money in a pumped-up economy. The state is breeding vipers in its own bosom.

I walked up Ferdausi, past the circle, double-decker red buses breaking at the bus stop. Around the corner, airline offices sell tickets to places around the world. But I haven't gone abroad yet and may never go.

The first month of autumn is a mutable month, with chilly mornings graying at the temples and leaves gone dry and brittle like Mashd-Ahmad. Branches shrivel and the wind smells of smoldering fires.

From the office I called my friend Abbas, who works for the National Television. The janitor passed through with the first tray of tea for the morning. There would be more to come, linking up

like compartments on a train steaming through the day. Abbas said he had news and told me where to meet him next day.

It's this business about Jalal. He's disappeared without a trace. Long ago he broke with his family, and he's been on his own since high school. I met him one spring years ago when I was tutoring my two younger cousins — boys of eighteen — to help them with finals and prepare them for the entrance examinations to university. They brought around Jalal, also in his last year of high school, talented, angry, revolt in his blood. I was the first man to give him a political education. Then years ago we parted ideologically, and he moved into the murky depths of the radical Left, but he always kept up with me. He's a rabid revolutionary.

Three months ago he warned our group of a SAVAK raid. If it hadn't been for Jalal, that night eight of us would have landed in jail. In a flash we cleared out of the basement we rented, taking typewriters and the mimeograph machine and political literature and our lists and personal papers and archives. They hit within hours. We thought we had a SAVAK collaborator, a snitch. The following week, in late-night sessions charged with hostile recriminations — exposing years of hidden rivalries and old wounds and dirty laundry — we tore through our entire organization, insulting and accusing until the animosity and ill will threatened to destroy us. That was how the group of three took control and held inquisitions and purges. They were young hotheads — emotional and dogmatic and vain without knowing enough about anything — who had run leftist cells in the provinces and now thought they'd take over in Tehran. They started on me. How had I known the secret police would hit that night? What was I hiding? Maybe I'd set the whole thing up to pit us against one another? Maybe I was the snitch? Until the last night, when I shot out of my seat and told them they could go to hell! We called ourselves progressive intellectuals? Freedom fighters? We were a bunch of sick, suspicious bastards. No wonder the country never got anywhere. I walked out.

It was shortly after that Jalal and I got drunk one night, unduly cynical about the world, unduly cynical about the loyalties of our respective comrades and the ever-present prospect of getting stabbed in the back by one of them. We made a pact that had nothing to do with politics. It was a personal pledge. We would watch each other's back.

I'm sure he was taken Wednesday night. He told me to meet him that night at nine-thirty at a café near Tehran University. He had something important to tell me. I waited for an hour, but he never showed up. He never made it home that night, his landlady told me. He never reappeared. I went by his coffee shop, but it was shuttered and padlocked. Jalal never closed shop, and if he couldn't be there himself — which happened frequently — he had young loafers looking for odd jobs to fill in. Familiar faces, student types, manning the store while he was away.

I went by his apartment on Jami and rang the doorbell, but there was no answer. I checked again with his landlady, who said he'd never come home that night. She was sure it was Wednesday night. She'd been unwell and had seen him go out at seven and called out to him, trying to collect her overdue rent, but he'd rushed off. She had decided to nab him when he got back. She'd left the radio on and barely touched her dinner and stayed up late waiting for him. She was fed up. Jalal had been avoiding her for weeks. She'd even left the front door of her ground-floor apartment ajar in case he snuck by. "He's a clever one!" she said. But he never showed up. At the crack of dawn — she could hear the *azahn* from the mosque down the street, the call for prayer — she had knocked on his door again, but no answer. She'd tried again all day, that night, the next morning. On the street the shopkeepers said rumor was Jalal had been arrested for being a profiteer. That's a cheap lie. A coffee seller is small-fry in the scheme of things. Still, the devastations of the antiprofiteering campaign by the government blaze through the city, inciting rabid disaffection,

punishing small merchants and retailers and shopkeepers in the bazaar for high prices, but leaving the big fat ones at the top out of the fire.

Jalal wasn't taken for profiteering. They would have made a spectacle of that. I'm sure he was taken in the dark by the secret police to some dark cell in this city.

Shirin called around midafternoon about dinner at her house. Jalal introduced us last year, telling me how she was a convenient woman. I take her type to late dinners at the College Inn, then back to their apartments, where they conveniently live alone. I've tried going out with teachers and upwardly mobile secretaries and civil servants, but I always leave them — these women forever looking for promises I will not keep. Shirin is divorced, without children, and an executive secretary to a big industrialist. Hourglass figure, spiked heels, dyed hair. She's easy and never asks what I do and where I go and what I think or tells me why I shouldn't. She splurges in the expensive boutiques and primps herself in bourgeois clothes and likes to be seen at the Copacabana cabaret, and at Cuchini and Chattanooga for dinner — the haunts of the bourgeoisie. Every year she treats herself to a new country. This summer she took off for Rome and Naples and Capri on Jahan Tours and brought back gifts and pictures of herself, the petit bourgeois tourist, in sunglasses and tight dresses, plastered against Italian monuments, dark boys salivating around her like dogs.

At nine-thirty that night in her apartment, she was purring sweet nothings to me and feeding me dinner. She brought out creamy desserts, droning on about leaving for New York together, where we could be free. "Free!" she repeated upstairs, releasing her black garter. She murmured another heartrending love song by Haideh in her dusky bedroom, where she did everything to please me. "I like you too much," she whispered at midnight. "You're like a drug."

But I was thinking of Mahastee. The peculiar sensation of seeing her. An hour in a garden, and the past had erupted before me like a geyser.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON I got a haircut at the barbershop on Manuchehri, then met my friend who works at the National Television. He was waiting at the corner drugstore on Takhte Jamshid across from the National Oil Company. He'd hitched a ride down from work. I'd told him about Jalal after the concert because I knew he knew someone in the Department of Police. At first he resisted, but I argued it was time to test his contact.

We walked past Shahreza and Rudaki Hall and the old mud-brick walls of the Soviet embassy compound, black crows rising from the towering trees, cawing.

"Once we were the servant of the Russians and British," Abbas said. "Now the Americans. In the ass-licking department — that's progress!"

I needed to buy shoes on Naderi, and he wanted to buy music.

"He's in Komiteh Prison," Abbas said.

So they had Jalal. An ominous feeling swept over me. "You're sure?"

"He hasn't been interrogated yet. Let this go, Reza. I don't like what I hear."

We stopped at the traffic light, backed-up cars honking furiously at each other in another afternoon of gridlock and exhaust fumes and rotten tempers. Pedestrians jaywalked through the traffic, cab drivers swearing at the lot of them.

We crossed past Starlight, the lingerie shop of the Armenian sisters, with garters and flimsy nightgowns and their own brand of stockings in the windows. We picked the Melli shoe store on Naderi, and I tried several styles and settled for a black leather

pair; then three doors down Abbas selected cassettes. We parted at the bus stop.

I walked on, jostled by pedestrians at dusk. Komiteh was a prison where they tortured answers out of prisoners. Things they did were told in whispers. Jalal's coffee beans and poetry and literary jargon were a thin veneer. They would break him into pieces, disassemble him, body and soul.

AT THE FRUIT MARKET on Estanbul Street, I stopped to buy two bags of bloodred pomegranates. A movie marquee loomed high above, advertising an Indian film with a doe-eyed girl, finger to the chin. In the Indian subcontinent they have to twirl around trees to declare their love. Hassan *agha,* the fruit seller, said he preferred any movie starring our very own sex bomb, Forouzan.

"Mr. Nirvani!" he said. "One day you'll be minister of education! When you are, don't forget me, your humble servant!"

His reverence for lofty posts and habit of self-abasement really annoys me. A ready recipe for breeding impetuous resentments.

"I don't want to be minister of education," I said.

He looked incredulous. "Why not? It's a terrific thing to be!"

I caught the bus near Baharestan Square to see Mother.

Baharestan always reminds me of Father. He loved the square, the white-columned building of the parliament and its rose gardens and the mosque of Sepahsalar. This was the heart of the city for him.

The bus was crowded, and by the time I got off half an hour later it was dusk. When I rang my sister's doorbell, she opened the front door as if she'd crouched behind it, her three children tugging at her skirt. They yelled, "Uncle!" and jumped into my arms like monkeys. I set my shoes by the door and gave my little nephew, Ali, a bag of pomegranates, and he grabbed it and ran off,

his two little sisters chasing after him. Zari said she'd bring tea. She's forever changing her hairstyle and hair color these days and wears too much jewelry and cheap perfume to console herself for her washout of a husband. Mother came in from chatting with the neighbors, and I rose to greet her.

"You've lost weight," she said.

She always says that when she feels I'm trying to hide something from her. We sat on the rug and sipped tea while Zari's children hopped about.

"You should get married," Mother said.

"He's waiting for the perfect woman!" said Zari.

"Let him wait," said Mother. "In the meantime, there's Mrs. Amanat's daughter. I think you should consider her seriously."

"Reza wants a modern woman," Zari said.

They stared.

Zari went to get more tea, and Mother picked up her sewing.

"Jalal's been arrested," I said.

She looked up, startled. "I think you're mixed up in something yourself. I worry."

She resumed sewing, her needle and thread looping deftly to complete a seam. She bent over, cut the thread with scissors.

"I'm going to see Nasrollah *mirza,*" I said. "To help Jalal."

"After all these years?" she said. "Go, in your father's memory."

We sat quietly. Outside, a roving vendor's singsong cry floated in the dusk. I remembered my father long ago buying a dark suit one day in the street.

"Won't you stay for dinner?" Mother asked.

"I must be going."

"Your brother-in-law never comes home," she said.

Zari brought tea and date cakes and insisted I stay for dinner. She's got wrinkles by her mouth and callused hands, and her eyes are vacant and her eyebrows so waxed there's nothing left of them.

The children wanted a ride on my back, so I took them around the room, and they laughed and screamed and kicked and fell over giggling.

It was pitch-dark when I left. I kissed Mother and Zari and the children. The streetlights were on; a dog barked in the distance. The new moon was out.

FOUR

THE SCHOOL BUS CAME in the morning to take the boys, who both had coughs and colds. I hugged them by the garden gate and they scrambled past me, the clinging mother, and rushed off, coats flailing.

Houshang barely ate breakfast, paging through the local English morning papers, griping about the perpetual shortage of skilled labor and cement. We had an argument as he tossed off the paper. I'd failed to perform, to look interested, the night before at the club. He thinks I do it on purpose.

"Why can't you be more attentive?" he said. "Why can't you be more — more wifely?"

The chauffeur drove him downtown. I like to drive myself, to come and go as I please, and I dislike the chauffeur, who's snoopy and whose only loyalty is to himself. My husband treats him like a personal adjutant, but I think he can't wait to hack off the hand that feeds him. He'd betray the lot of us in a moment.

I had decided Thierry could help Mr. Bashirian's son and just needed to be persuaded. He's a well-respected banker, a man who commands attention in Paris. One call to a noted journalist there, and they'd come after the story. Young innocent snatched off to prison versus oppressive regime with oil money louder than rights. That's how they'd write it. The story would sell itself, turning up the pressure here. There's no such thing as an objective journalist. They have their own axes to grind, blinded by their own civilizations. And I don't trust the motives of newspapers. They run on abridged perceptions. They see us as a stinking oil-rich country lecturing them back, and they can't wait to burst our bubble.

Thierry would of course resist at first. He'd resist any sort of meddling that could mean serious trouble. He does big business in this country and wants to keep it that way for as long as possible. The story would have to get out without being traced back to him.

I didn't want to call him but suspected he'd show up at the French Club for lunch. I'd arrange to bump into him. It was short notice, but I first called my two best friends, then several others, until I found one who could make lunch at one-thirty.

As a manager in the division of the High Economic Council in charge of publications, I went from meeting to meeting all morning. We commission and publish research papers, analyze government statistics, produce a monthly bulletin and a quarterly journal. I was hoping to avoid Mr. Bashirian. I hadn't a shred of consolation, only bad news. I would tell him soon enough.

The French Club serves the best lunch in town. At one-thirty, heads turned as Pouran and I were seated by the window. I was disappointed; I couldn't see what I had come for. The garden was strangely nondescript, with towering and anemic fir trees, the light bright and hard.

Pouran had dyed her hair another nasty shade of blond. Her face was gray at midday, despite the makeup. She asked if I liked the new color.

"Wonderful."

"I prefer yours. Iraj likes me blond," she complained.

She likes to complain because it makes her feel important. We ordered. Friends of my parents' stopped by our table on their way to bridge upstairs. When I turned to flag the waiter, I saw Thierry come in with three men. They passed by us to the main dining room, Thierry deep in conversation.

"He's ravishing," Pouran whispered.

Pouran has been fidgety for months. A cruise in the Greek islands in early September had only piled gold on her, but provided no solutions. We lit cigarettes with coffee. Pouran ran through her standard list: our beautiful women; who had a superb figure or skin and hair; whose husband was richer and threw bigger parties; and who was on which diet and lover and had plastic surgery and bought which clothes from which designer and stayed in which European hotel. I had to get to work but needed Thierry. Pouran needed him more than I did. He had all the right markings to leap to the top of her guest list.

"He looks good enough to eat!" she said, biting her lip.

Her coarse sexuality can be quite beguiling. She sauntered over and Thierry rose and they kissed, and he introduced her to his colleagues. He wears dark suits like no other man, ramrod-straight. Steel blue eyes like silvery mirrors. I stayed at our table calculating the tip. When I looked up, he waved and I walked over. He said Pouran was having a party Thursday.

"It would be the greatest honor of my life to have you there," she said to Thierry.

Her exaggerations sweep the world, evacuating truth and meaning and finer distinctions in their wake.

"And bring your friends!" She smiled at the others.

My appeal for Peyman Bashirian had to wait for Thursday.

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON Mr. Bashirian sat before me. He'd closed the door to my office as if I held new hope.

"Your son's in Komiteh Prison. There's nothing you can do. They'll be calling you." I'd repeated the message a dozen times, repeated it in different ways, though the message wouldn't change, no matter how I tried. He stared expectantly, as if I were holding back or better news was at the end of some sentence not yet uttered. I told him there was nothing more. He asked again, then stared blankly at the wall. He looked like he hadn't slept for days. He said he was on Valium.

"Tea?" I asked.

He shook his head and just sat there, the silence awful, his appearance alarming, anemic. He sagged. I suggested he go home early. He said he couldn't stand home without Peyman, so I offered to give him a ride. As we left, the secretary in the outer office stared after us.

He lived near Dampezeshki and gave directions and thanked me for driving him home more times than was decent for a man of his standing.

I asked if he was eating properly. Expounding on the benefits of nutrition, my tone clipped like a nurse's, to steel him.

Dusk. The sun deserting. The tail end of the day shortened and dark. People in coats called out their destinations to orange taxis.

Mr. Bashirian pointed to a small house and invited me in. Who could refuse a grieving father? He had several rooms and a narrow kitchen and tiny backyard with a grape arbor. Dark rooms with speckled gray tile flooring and feeble overhead lights. They were the rooms of a father and son. There wasn't the slightest vestige of a woman.

He made tea. I walked about the small living room. The heavy-handed oil paintings on the walls were his. He'd been taking lessons for years. I saw his small and modest signature, slanted like two birds flying south: *Kamal*. Nostalgic renderings. A virginal maiden with clasped hands and soulful eyes. Wispy willows bent over a stony river. Silvery moonlight over desolate hills. He came in, pointed to the steel bookcase holding his son's collection of photographs, tucked away into albums, from his travels around the country.

"They haven't gone through his stuff. They haven't come yet."

He was waiting for the secret police. He expected them, like a sort of death.

We sat at the table in the hallway and laid out the last batch of pictures Peyman had taken. Mr. Bashirian handled the photographs the way I imagined he would have handled his son — discreetly. They were pictures from Peyman's last journey to the eastern border of the Kavir in Khorassan Province, towns ringing the Salt Desert.

"From Kashmar to Gonabad, then Ferdaus, Boshruyeh, Tabas, and Robaat-Kur down to Robaat-Posht-Badaam," said the father.

Places in the dust. He'd come to see them through the eyes of his son. He spread out the photographs with quiet hands, leaning over them, peering.

"He understands these places," said Mr. Bashirian. "The way the sun breaks on their backs. Their strange and deserted silence, the light in the eyes of their inhabitants."

Together we stared at the photographs.

"He loved the desert," he said. "You can't imagine how he spoke of it. It was a mystical thing. He told me it was there he could find God. Alone in that desolate place where man is stripped of his earthly masks and material wealth, where nothing can be faked."

His voice broke. He wanted to ask for the hundredth time why

they had taken Peyman. The question hung between us, unspoken. He went to bring tea.

He was so resigned. Why wasn't he angry? Anger was a way out of grief.

When I left, he waved from the doorway, already sinking into the marshes of desolation. The light was to his back, his body silhouetted in the doorway. He smiled and I smiled back, walking away from him.

His grace had allowed me to leave with impunity. He blamed no one except himself.

FRIDAY I WOKE UP late with a headache. I called in my sons, Ehsan and Kamran, who were playing soccer in the garden. We had breakfast in the upstairs study, going through photos of our summer at the Caspian. They climbed over each other to see first or better, pointing to our friends, the villa, the local caretaker and his family, the mimosas, the old hotel, the lush green mountains of Ramsar sliding to the shore. They laughed, ended up on the floor slugging each other. Ehsan, a photocopy of his father, is already more handsome, nearly regal in bearing, calculating. Kamran looks like Mother, with light hair and a broad face and my hazel eyes and our penchant for sarcasm.

I sent them off to get dressed. Houshang had a squash game at the club.

I was going to tell Father about Peyman Bashirian's arrest. I planned on telling him after the family lunch. He's been moody for weeks, growing old, assailed by a host of invisible afflictions.

Last night Houshang and I had an argument before going to Pouran and Iraj's party. We're out nearly every night. We had an argument after we got back. That's how we keep up with each other.

When we got up to our bedroom, I said we'd be at my parents'

for lunch the next day instead of his. That blew his top. He started about my flirtations with Thierry.

"You were whispering in a corner," he said.

"The music was loud."

"Then why not dance?" he said, laughing like a hyena.

He does that to keep cool in a rage; I'm allergic to the sound it makes. He thinks he's guileful and indirect. But I know he whores around with foreign and expensive imports, a tradition he maintains accompanied by loyal friends. Their tribal ritual. They trade stories about procuring pleasure behind closed doors. They snigger, invent. They should learn to make love instead of buying it — to give of themselves, if that were even possible.

Houshang believes it my duty to turn a blind eye. He bears gifts. I'm the kind who looks a gift horse in the mouth. Three years ago I realized he had a mistress. Unlike the generation of my parents, who had arranged marriages, I couldn't shrug it off. I hadn't been educated for this. My generation flatters itself that we determine our fate; we are liberated, individualistic, self-reliant. Our marriages require absolute compatibility and possession, a form of predestination and myth we can't escape. I confronted Houshang, but he denied everything, remarkably well rehearsed for the occasion. I was the one ill prepared, stunned at the limits of emancipation like a fish out of water. I warned him then and there. Later, I realized it was a rut I would be in forever. To preserve my dignity, I feigned nonchalance but kept an eye on him, looking for signposts and slipups. A steely warden in an institution, that's what I've become. Distant, hard-hearted — for which I blame him and dislike him even more.

He went up to bed with pills and a bottle of water and bloodshot eyes. I stayed downstairs, shuffling through pages of a report at two in the morning.

Thierry had come to the party flanked by his banker friends.

They met haughty courtiers and enthralled diplomats and feverish MBAs and businessmen and jaded loafers and professional freeloaders and part-time intellectuals and full-time charlatans and brats. His friends looked impressed. "Especially by the women!" they kept repeating. Not too original, still, they spoke from habit. Who knows what the truth is abroad.

Iraj and Pouran Mazaher are the perfect embodiment of the new elite of the capital. They're social arbiters, beholden to no one and nothing, their home a consummation of the boom mentality, slightly chilling with its grip on grandeur.

There was throbbing disco music, important bouquets from Rose Noir in all the rooms. The grand salon was set with the requisite faux gold knockoff Louis XIV furniture, set under knockoff tableaux of bucolic scenes with maidens in bonnets among cows and sheep. A friend had told me Iraj liked his call girls dressed up that way — as shepherdesses. The other rooms were set with gargantuan modern Italian furniture and bogus modern art. There was opium and grass in the private den, where the door remained shut. A mound of pearl gray caviar in a silver bowl on crushed ice surrounded by toast and fresh limes was carried around by a sullen manservant in white jacket and white gloves. Guests were already planning to go on to La Cheminée, or La Bohème for the Dark Eyes Band, though La Bohème wasn't as fashionable anymore. Dinner was served too late as usual, the succulent foods piled and steaming around the dining table, overlit by a fearsome chandelier. Fish and partridge and roast lambs and stews and silver trays heaped with rice. The host was on the prowl, roaming rooms gratifyingly decorated to his tastes. Shirt tight, hands wandering. My husband and Iraj are two peas in a pod, chewing the end of their Cuban cigars in well-orchestrated candlelight. Pouran kept pinching her breasts together, busy laughing in all the rooms, whispering to choice guests it was the greatest honor of her life to have them there.

Halfway through the night, Thierry heard my case about Pey-

man Bashirian in a corner. False arrest, the rights of prisoners, an appeal to human rights organizations. "I know the boy's father," I said. At first he looked amused. That nearly did me in I felt so insulted. Then he began to flirt, by reflex, like a dog salivating. I countered, going on about torture, electric prods, mutilated genitals. He cooled off astonishingly well, nodding with the aplomb befitting a very distant heir to the Enlightenment, more pantomime than compassion. I pressed on and he listened in earnest, suddenly turning chilly — this wasn't his idea of fun at Iraj and Pouran's. He said he'd commit to nothing except thinking about it and calling me later. "When?" I insisted. "Later," he repeated. Pulling in closer, he asked me to dance, his eyes glassy, the song blaring from the towering speakers. He was about to take advantage, and I refused too quickly. Bad move, I thought, walking away. If you ask the favor, you dance. But I'd seen Houshang watching from across the room and had no need for a showdown, which came anyway once we got home.

Around midmorning I called Mother to ask if she needed anything for Friday lunch.

"The marzipan cream cake from Danish Pastry."

"The green dome?"

"The green one," she said, and hung up.

We both hate small talk.

Pouran called five minutes later. Thierry had made a pass at her, she gushed, tripping over her words. "See," she said, "he's in love with me! Of course, I adore my husband!" Cocky from the merest whiff of success, she gossiped about her guests. She collects people so she can watch them up close, then trash them, drawing satisfaction from denigrating them for a host of imperfections. She complained that her servants were turning sullen.

"The ingrates!" she said, yawning. "I've applied for Bangladeshis to rid me of these local asses sulking and glaring at us so disapprovingly."

Pouran and Iraj would rather import a whole country to avoid contact with our masses. They throw a bash a week, and every night they're either out or have guests. He's my husband's best friend; she's neurotic. An unlikely mixture of savvy, naïveté, hard glamour, and shaky self-respect. Her impetuous generosities and revelry are offset by flashes of vulgarity and malice.

She hung up, saying I looked on edge.

AT A QUARTER TO ONE we were speeding up Saltanatabad, the green marzipan cream cake on my lap. The children had been picked up earlier by their uncle. We were behind a brown car with a dented fender. Within seconds Houshang was trying to overtake it. The driver weaved left, then right. Four men were in the car. Houshang honked and the car accelerated. He shifted gears, swearing under his breath.

"The cake," I said.

Houshang floored the gas pedal, but the brown car cut in left again. Houshang swung back abruptly. As I swayed toward the window, I caught sight of one, then two gendarmerie jeeps in my side-view mirror. The jeeps honked. We were within a mile of the army barracks. Houshang, provoked and indignant, wouldn't let them overtake us.

The jeeps turned on their sirens, and Houshang slowed down. The jeeps pulled out, speeding past us, two army vehicles now visible behind them. Then something peculiar happened in front. The jeeps jackknifed into the brown car suddenly, forcing it off the road. Houshang slammed his foot on the brakes. I lurched forward with the cake. The two armored vehicles tailing the jeeps overtook us, barricading the brown car within seconds. Uniformed men poured out, shouting and pointing guns at the four men in the car. Suddenly there were gendarmes and soldiers and guns and men barking orders everywhere.

An agitated gendarme ran out and jumped in front of our car. He screamed at us, motioning frantically for Houshang to drive on. The armored vehicles were blocking our way. We had to back up.

I turned for a quick look at the men. Two were being dragged out by force, their arms covering their heads. Two were already up against the car, legs spread, arms high. I saw them in profile; they looked so young — black hair, jeans and sweaters and sneakers. Student types, but impassive, unafraid.

The gendarme slammed his fist on our hood. "Go!" he shouted, pointing.

Houshang backed up quickly, then shot up the road. Every month they ambush armed guerrillas in the streets in shoot-outs. We get lists and mug shots in the papers, but these boys hadn't been armed. Houshang said SAVAK was infiltrating underground organizations, uncovering nasty plots of insurrection against the monarchy like clockwork. Someone had to do the dirty work.

"Better count your blessings," he said.

"Which blessing?" I said. "Killing boys like them? Living in a bubble?"

"What, you want pandemonium? Don't be irrational! We're kept from raving maniacs and ruthless Marxists and bloodthirsty ideologues."

"Don't exaggerate."

"You're *such* an idealist!"

I looked into the side-view mirror until the men were distant specks.

By the foothills past the palace, we turned left into Niavaran and to the narrow side streets beyond. Friday is quiet, especially deep in the side streets, quiet if you only hear what you want. There have been more than twelve political assassinations carried out by the Left this year. Last month armed Marxist rebels gunned down three American military advisers to the Shah at midday downtown. This month in three separate incidents armed guerril-

las have been gunned down by the security forces in the streets. Their names were in the evening papers: Aladpoush, Ahangar, Davari, Olfat. I read them out for my brother on the back veranda facing the garden, but he shrugged it off. I read them out for Father after lunch, but he dozed off. Repeated the names in the bathroom mirror all week. Who were they? These young men, prepared to die for a cause. Prepared to die like heroes in an epic. SAVAK — ruthless itself — decries the ruthlessness of guerrilla groups who purge their own, kill each other off, then burn the bodies and dump them in the city and blame SAVAK. Houshang — supposed realist — dismisses all such incidents as minor blips on an unclouded horizon.

We turned in at the gates of the old garden on the foothills of Shemiran. Once there were open fields here.

Mashdi Hossein, the gardener, waved from the small porch of his quarters by the old grape arbor. On the other side of the driveway, his youngest son crossed the lawn ploddingly with a rake. The children congregated by the pool were pointing and shouting. They parted as Mashd-Hossein's son stepped up to the perimeter. He lowered the rake, nudging the soccer ball floating in the middle of the pool among the leaves.

I counted cars all the way up the driveway. My parents had all their children with their spouses and grandchildren, which came to fifteen, and several aunts and uncles, who brought nieces and nephews. Thirty for Friday lunch was usual, not counting friends who dropped in. Houshang was sulking because they were all my relatives instead of his, but he was charming the lot of them within minutes. He worked the living room and I headed for the kitchen.

Mother was tucking lamb into hot, fluffy rice. Mashdi Ghanbar, our cook for more than thirty years — reciter of epic poems, and repository of Napoleonic longings — was quibbling ostentatiously about the whereabouts of four canisters of cooking oil. The new maid, a girl of eighteen from the village, came in the back door

carrying fresh, long loaves of *sangak* bread. Mashd-Ghanbar gave her his most menacing look. She'd come to learn that meant she might as well take poison.

I opened the cake box.

"It's dented." Mother pointed to the green dome.

"We were in an ambush!"

She nodded, heaping more baby lima bean rice onto her china platter as if the outside world didn't really count.

FIVE

I called Mr. Mosharraf, who was delighted to hear from me. "It's been so long!" he said. The last time I'd seen him, Father had forced me to go when he was suffering from a failing heart and I was a student discovering politics.

The gardens of Shemiran sprawl for miles. In the summer, past the forbidding walls and iron gates flung open, you can see their winding driveways covered with the finest pebbles, the freshly cut lawns bordered with ribbons of snapdragons and petunias and marigolds. Vast gardens, with tennis courts and swimming pools. Well past the shrubbery and rose arbors and cypress, the houses are covered with honeysuckle, morning glory, and wisteria. It's serene here, the world at its best, not congested and crude and hectic like downtown. If you stand up here long enough, you think nothing will ever go wrong.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The history of families residing in these gardens has been as fickle as fate. Their fortunes have cringed and surged at the whim of politics.

Nasrollah *mirza* Mosharraf is from an old aristocratic landowning family, with one branch in Azarbaijan. His wife is from a clan of landowners in Tabriz; blue-eyed, blond, obdurate, from a family with a flair for commerce. A formidable woman, Nasrollah *mirza* liked to tell Father. He congratulated himself often for winning her hand, disobeying his imperious mother to marry her. Just like his own willful father a century before — a member of that large tribe that had ruled then as the Qajar dynasty — who had disobeyed his pious yet calculating mother and refused to marry a relative, a Qajar princess. Instead Fathollah *mirza* — named after the spiritual and eminent sheikh and writer buried in Najaf — had headed north for Rasht and taken the boat from Enzeli across the Caspian to Baku and boarded a train from czarist Russia across Europe. He had sown his wild oats all over Saint Petersburg, then Vienna and France, and graduated from the Sorbonne. Then he'd come home to marry the haughty and impossible daughter of the eccentric and ferocious Ebrahim *khan* Sardar Bahador, who commanded his own army and whose ancestors had come from the steppes of central Asia near the river Amu Darya. He'd brought her Russian crystal chandeliers, Viennese vases, silk brocades, and a magnificent dinner set for eighty-four, hand-painted in Saint Petersburg. She had been raised as few women in her time, fluent in French and Russian and Turkish, riding bareback and hunting and presiding over her villages and crops and lands herself, settling disputes and meting out justice like a man.

Their forefathers had fought in the wars against the Ottomans and Russians. For centuries they had worked the land and owned villages and orchards and pastures in Azarbaijan. But the newly wed couple chose to live in Tehran in a large house designed by a famous Russian architect, with porches and columns, and there threw the most unusual parties for the most unusual mixture of guests the capital had ever seen — with poetry and music and theater and women mixing with men — until the court expressed

displeasure with Fathollah *mirza* and sent him into exile, charging him with political intrigue. He had laughed it off and buckled down on a diet of yogurt with mountain herbs and bread and fruit to write a travelogue, a history of eastern Azarbaijan, a classic study of the *qanat* underground water-channel system of Iran, three primers on fruit trees, a book on herbal medicine, and his memoirs, lost to future generations through neglect. He had entertained there — intellectuals and poets and governors and freethinkers and French, British, and Russian delegates coming through Azarbaijan. They had enjoyed his hospitality and conversation so much he'd been recalled to the capital, returning to favor in his elegant Russian coach guarded by his riflemen and followed by his entire household and retinue of servants, and the formidable Delpasand, his old black nanny from Madagascar. Officer, governor, and minister, Fathollah *mirza* — awarded the title Mosharraf-saltaneh — was also a constitutionalist. He had had five daughters and a son. Their firstborn, a daughter, had died within the year, in the cholera epidemic of Tehran. In her grief his young wife had left for Tabriz and there called for my grandfather, who knew her family well and was a respected religious man and Sufi, a gentle soul who had come to console her. She had stayed on, and in time he had taught her the mystical texts and then brought his whole family and his son, Alimardan, my father, then a young boy. She had grown so attached to this son that when returning to Tehran she had insisted Alimardan return with her and enter into her household, and she had prevailed.

Ten months later, on a snowy night, her second-born, a son, Nasrollah, had been delivered by a Georgian doctor from Tbilisi. "A big, fat, healthy son!" she'd said, grateful year after year, telling everyone it was my father who had brought with him from Tabriz her good fortune. And so he had remained in Tehran with the family and held a special place in her heart. And the year she'd taken her pilgrimage to Mecca and become a *hajjieh,* he had become a

hajji, because she'd taken him along with her other attendants. They always spoke Turkish together, Mahbanou *khanom* and Father, and she'd had him tutor her son and daughters at home so they would learn their mother's first language. And so in time when Father was appointed overseer of Nasrollah *mirza*'s estates, the two spoke Turkish together, for them a language about peasants and farmers and weather and land deals and crop yields and local elections and their various troubles and private political convictions. When Father taught me Turkish as a child, it was the language of his own father and mother and of another life abandoned early in Tabriz; and the stories of that childhood, and speaking his mother tongue far away, drew him back there and to that time, and drew me. In that language too he whispered to Mother a lifetime — though she spoke it little, she understood it — his private thoughts at the end of the day, and his sudden endearments to her, which were so rare and true they made her blush and bite her lip and look away.

When Nasrollah *mirza*'s mother died, Father gave a eulogy for her outside Tabriz on one of her estates, and the entire audience of peasants and family attendants and villagers from far and wide, standing before him and pouring out the doors and into the gardens, had wept. Father said he'd seen nothing like her, her skin pale like the Russian pearl necklace she always wore, her eyes hazel and arresting — I saw her in her old age, and her eyes were still arresting — perhaps an impossible woman, Father said, because of the high standards she kept, her insight unequaled. For her son, she had brought tutors to the house in the turbulent times of Mohammad Ali Shah, then sent him abroad to Vienna and the Sorbonne. To Father she had given one of her estates, named after him, Mardanabad, which years later provoked a nasty land dispute and was finally appropriated by one of her nephews.

Nasrollah *mirza* had returned from abroad, feisty and charismatic, and served his country — well but erratically, Father used

to say — now and then allying himself with the wrong side, and at such times retreating to one of his gardens. Father, who had known him since childhood, thought he actually preferred these retreats to all else. He said Nasrollah *mirza* possessed, of course, a sense of general superiority — understandable and appropriate, considering his breeding — but suffered from a crankiness that often landed him in trouble and engendered bouts of solitude and gloom. In time the family's large estates shriveled with the years and the proclamation of the Land Reform Law, which, striking like an earthquake, abruptly shattered a system entrenched for centuries. Father had overseen them all. He said the Mosharrafs talked about soil and orchards and homestead and heritage the way the devout talk about God.

He'd known them all so long, he said they had become his family. And when he finally married, he asked and was given a distant relative of theirs as his bride. Her father was a small-land owner who owned vineyards, and she brought with her a modest dowry. Mother, reserved and devout, spoke seldom of her affection for them, perhaps because she was a poor cousin and knew them little and felt far removed from them except through blood.

THE GARDENER GREETED ME at the gates of their garden. He didn't recognize me, and I had to tell him who I was.

"Good to have you back!" said Mashdi Hossein.

We shook hands and he held on to mine, all the while asking after Mother and praising Father's memory. He'd grown bonier and slightly stooped. He told me with pride, beaming, how his older sons now attended university.

The old house was exactly like before. I couldn't even count the times I'd come and gone during my entire childhood and early adolescence. I felt a surge, a strange fulfillment. Even the position of the flower pots hadn't changed on the stone steps going up both

sides of the white-columned porch — pots of geraniums and fragrant white jasmine — the balconies on the upper floor overlooking the gardens trailing wisteria. A garden unaffected by the world outside its walls. Friezes of lapis blue and turquoise and yellow tile with foliations graced the pale brick along the entire front of the house. The stained glass glowed red and blue and green above the front doors, backlit by the Russian crystal chandelier in the hallway. Father had brought me for years, his felt hat on his head, then in his hand as we passed through the doors.

I climbed the steps, hesitated on the stone porch. I had come back a changed man, not in the mold of my father. I was about to see Mahastee. When I'd seen her at the concert in Bagh Ferdaus, she'd triggered emotions I'd long forgotten. Any moment now we'd come face-to-face. This was her home, a house set long ago into my flesh and bones.

I STOOD IN THE DARK vestibule; the foyer just beyond was the axis of the house. Two magnificent oil paintings of the epic battles of the *Shahnameh* still faced each other on the walls. Corridors with numerous doors stretched to the sides and back, their tiled floors covered in fine old rugs. The central corridor had double doors at the end with stained glass, mirroring the entrance, giving on to a large garden of cypress and walnut and fig and mulberry.

Coming down the center hallway, the old nanny of the household, Tourandokht, stalked a toddler with a bowl and spoonful of food. Swaying and clucking like a hen, she was in slow and painful pursuit of the child until she saw me. The child escaped.

"Reza!" she cried in surprise, heaping endearments on hugs and noisy kisses. "Let me get a good look at you."

She said I resembled Father more and more. She insisted I take lunch. I told her Nasrollah *mirza* was expecting me, and she understood and waddled away to tell him. Children I didn't recognize

ran down one corridor and up behind Tourandokht, mimicking her waddle and giggling.

The elaborate chandelier with crystal prisms was dusty. The walls needed a fresh coat of paint. The old grandfather clock was still in the dark corner — the word *Tehran* set large and gleaming gold above six o'clock, the placid pendulums stately in the etched-glass case. I could hear it ticking. It was running eleven minutes late. I heard doors slamming and children laughing upstairs and the adults' indistinguishable voices in the drawing room and, to my left, the clunk and clatter in the kitchen every time its doors swung open. Lunch was over.

Nasrollah *mirza* never keeps one waiting. Tourandokht emerged from the far room, waving impatiently.

"Come on!" she said, summoning me before the group.

I went, the moment strangely mesmerizing but distant, like nostalgia.

"My dear boy!" cried Nasrollah *mirza* Mosharraf at the threshold, embracing me. He called to his wife and all his sons, Kavoos and Ardeshir and Bahram, smiling all the while as if the years gone between us didn't matter.

The drawing room was crowded, and the women assembled at one end looked me over with polite society smiles as the men, snug in tailored suits and old-world etiquette, scrutinized me. Behind them, the walls were adorned with friezes of plasterwork set above Qajar court paintings; potted palms stood in the corners; and the scent of tobacco and cigars mingled with sweetmeats and perfumes as a manservant took around a silver tray of tea, children threading their way past him, dodging mothers who were telling them they had to go upstairs to take a nap. I saw them all in one sweep, but I was looking for Mahastee.