

THE BOOK OF FATE

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THE BOOK OF FATE

Parinoush Saniee

Translated from Persian
by Sara Khalili



ANANSI

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Cast of Characters

Ahmad	Massoumeh's older brother
Akbar	communist party activist
Ali	Massoumeh's younger brother
Amir-Hossein	old sweetheart of Mrs Parvin
Ardalan	Parvaneh's son
Ardeshir	Mansoureh's son
Asghar Agha	one of Massoumeh's suitors
Atefeh	Massoud's wife and Mr Maghsoudi's daughter
Aunt Ghamar	Massoumeh's maternal aunt
Bahman Khan	Mansoureh's husband
Bibi	Hamid's paternal grandmother
Dariush	Parvaneh's younger brother
Dorna	Siamak and Lili's daughter, Massoumeh's first granddaughter
Dr Ataii	neighbourhood pharmacist
Ehteram-Sadat	Massoumeh's maternal cousin and Mahmoud's wife
Faati	Massoumeh's younger sister
Faramarz Abdollahi	Shirin's fiancé
Farzaneh	Parvaneh's younger sister
Firouzeh	Faati's daughter, Massoumeh's niece
Gholam-Ali	Mahmoud's eldest son
Gholam-Hossein	Mahmoud's second son and youngest child

Grandmother	Massoumeh's paternal grandmother
Granny Aziz	Massoumeh's maternal grandmother
Haji Agha	Mrs Parvin's husband
Hamid Soltani	Massoumeh's husband, communist activist
Khosrow	Parvaneh's husband
Ladan	Massoud's fiancée
Laleh	Parvaneh's second daughter
Lili	Parvaneh's daughter
Mahboubeh	Massoumeh's paternal cousin
Mahmoud	Massoumeh's oldest brother
Manijeh	Hamid's youngest sister, Massoumeh's sister-in-law
Mansoureh	Hamid's older sister, Massoumeh's sister-in-law
Maryam	nosy classmate of Massoumeh
Massoud	Massoumeh's son and second child
Massoumeh	narrator and protagonist of the novel
(Massoum) Sadeghi	
Mehdi	Shahrzad's husband and co-leader of communist organisation
Mohsen Khan	Mahboubeh's husband
Monir	Hamid's oldest sister, Massoumeh's sister-in-law
Mostafa Sadeghi (Agha Mostafa)	Massoumeh's father
Mr and Mrs Ahmadi	Parvaneh's parents
Mr Maghsoudi	Massoud's fellow soldier at the war front and later his boss and father-in-law
Mr Motamedi	vice president at the government agency where Massoumeh is employed
Mr Shirzadi	a department director at the government agency where Massoumeh works
Mr Zargar	Massoumeh's supervisor at the government agency

Mrs Parvin	next-door neighbour of Massoumeh's family
Nazy	Saiid's wife
Parvaneh Ahmadi	Massoumeh's best friend
Sadegh Khan	Faati's husband, Massoumeh's brother-in-law
Saiid Zareii	Dr Ataii's assistant pharmacist
Shahrzad (Aunt Sheri)	Hamid's friend and co-leader of communist organisation
Shirin	Massoumeh's daughter and youngest child
Siamak	Massoumeh's son and first child
Sohrab	Firouzeh's husband
Tayebeh (Mother)	Massoumeh's mother
Uncle Abbas	Massoumeh's paternal uncle
Uncle Asadollah	Massoumeh's paternal uncle
Uncle Hamid (Hamid Agha)	Massoumeh's maternal uncle
Zahra	Mahmoud's daughter and middle child
Zari	Massoumeh's older sister who died when Massoumeh was eight years old

Locations

Ahvaz – capital city of the western province of Khuzestan and near the Iran–Iraq border

Ghazvin – a major city in northern Iran

Golab-Darreh – a town north of Tehran, in the Alborz mountain range

Kermanshah – the capital city of Kermanshah province in western Iran

Mashad – a city in north-eastern Iran and near the borders of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan; considered holy as the site of the Shrine of Imam Reza

Mount Damavand – the highest peak of the Alborz mountain range, north of Tehran

Qum – a city south-west of Tehran and the centre for Shi'a Islam scholarship. Considered holy as the site of the Fatima al-Massoumeh Shrine

Rezaieh – a city in north-western Iran and the capital of West Azerbaijan province

Shemiran – northern suburb of Tehran

Tabriz – the capital city of East Azerbaijan province in northern Iran

Zahedan – the capital city of Sistan and Baluchestan province, near the border with Pakistan and Afghanistan

Glossary

Agha – an honorific meaning gentleman, sir, mister.

Haft-Seen – Literally meaning ‘The Seven ‘S’s’ is a traditional table setting of *Nowruz*, the Iranian new year celebration at the start of spring. The *Haft-Seen* table includes seven items all starting with the letter ‘s’ in the Persian alphabet and they symbolise rebirth, health, happiness, prosperity, joy, patience and beauty. The seven items are apples, sprouts, vinegar, garlic, sumac, *samanu* (a creamy wheat pudding) and *senjed* (a sweet Silver berry or Oleaster fruit). Among other items included are: mirror, candles, painted eggs, coins, goldfish and rose water.

Hijab – refers to both the head-covering worn by Muslim women and modest Islamic styles of dress in general. In Iran, the most common forms of *hijab* have traditionally been the headscarf and the chador. In post-revolution Iran, women are also required to wear a loose-fitting long tunic or manteau.

Khan – obsolescent title of the nobility or tribal chiefs, now used as an honorific corresponding to ‘Sir’.

Korsi – traditional furniture of Iranian culture. It is a low table with a heater underneath it and blankets thrown over it. People sit on futons around the *korsi* with the blankets covering their legs. It is a relatively inexpensive way to stay warm in the winter, as the

futons and blankets trap the warm air. During the cold months, most family activities take place around the *korsi*.

Wedding *sofreh* – a fine cloth, often with glittering gold and silver threads, is spread out on the floor and adorned with various foods and objects traditionally associated with marriage. These include a mirror flanked by a pair of candelabra, a tray of multi-coloured spices, an assortment of sweets and pastries, a large flatbread, coloured eggs, a platter of feta cheese and fresh herbs, two large sugar cones, a flask of rose water, a small brazier burning wild rue, and an open Qu’ran or a Diwan of Hafez.

SAVAK – Secret Service Police.

CHAPTER ONE

I was always surprised by the things my friend Parvaneh did. She never gave a thought to her father's honour and reputation. She talked loudly on the street, looked at shop windows and sometimes even stopped and pointed things out to me. No matter how many times I said, 'It's not proper, let's go', she just ignored me. Once she even shouted out to me from across the street, and worse yet, she called me by my first name. I was so embarrassed I prayed I would just melt and vanish into the earth. Thank God, none of my brothers were around, or who knows what would have happened.

When we moved from Qum, Father allowed me to continue going to school. Later, when I told him, in Tehran girls don't wear chadors to school and I will be a laughing stock, he even let me wear a headscarf, but I had to promise to be careful and not bring him shame by becoming corrupted and spoiled. I didn't know what he meant and how a girl could get spoiled like stale food, but I did know what I had to do to not bring him shame, even without wearing a chador and proper hijab. I love Uncle Abbas! I heard him tell Father, 'Brother! A girl has to be good inside. It's not about proper hijab. If she's bad, she'll do a thousand things under her chador that would leave a father with no honour at all. Now that you have moved to Tehran, you have to live like Tehranis. The days when girls were locked up at home have passed. Let her

go to school and let her dress like everyone else, otherwise she will stand out even more.'

Uncle Abbas was very wise and sensible, and he had to be. At the time, he had been living in Tehran for almost ten years. He came to Qum only when someone died. Whenever he came, Grandmother, God rest her soul, would say, 'Abbas, why don't you come to see me more often?'

And Uncle Abbas, with that loud laugh, would say, 'What can I do? Tell the relatives to die more often.' Grandmother would slap him and pinch his cheek so hard that its mark would stay on his face for a long time.

Uncle Abbas's wife was from Tehran. She always wore a chador when she came to Qum, but everyone knew that in Tehran she didn't keep proper hijab. Her daughters paid no mind to anything at all. They even went to school without hijab.

When Grandmother died, her children sold the family house where we lived and gave everyone their share. Uncle Abbas told Father, 'Brother, this is no longer the place to live. Pack up and come to Tehran. We'll put our shares together and we'll buy a shop. I will rent a house for you near by and we'll work together. Come; start building a life for yourself. The only place you can make money is Tehran.'

At first, my older brother Mahmoud objected. He said, 'In Tehran one's faith and religion fall by the wayside.'

But my brother Ahmad was happy. 'Yes, we have to go,' he insisted. 'After all, we have to make something of ourselves.'

And Mother cautioned, 'But think of the girls. They won't be able to find a decent husband there, no one knows us in Tehran. Our friends and family are all here. Massoumeh has her year six certificate and even studied an extra year. It's time for her to get married. And Faati has to start school this year. God knows how she'll turn out in Tehran. Everyone says a girl who grows up in Tehran isn't all that good.'

Ali, who was in year four, said, 'She wouldn't dare. It's not like I'm dead! I will watch her like a hawk and I won't let her budge.'

Then he kicked Faati who was sitting on the floor, playing. She started screaming, but no one paid any attention.

I went and hugged her and said, 'What nonsense. Do you mean to say that all the girls in Tehran are bad?'

Brother Ahmad, who loved Tehran to death, snapped, 'You, shut up!' Then he turned to the others and said, 'The problem is Massoumeh. We'll marry her off here and then move to Tehran. This way, there'll be one less nuisance. And we'll have Ali watch over Faati.' He patted Ali on the back and proudly said that the boy has zeal and honour, and will act responsibly. My heart sank. From the start, Ahmad had been against my going to school. It was all because he himself didn't study and kept failing year eight until he finally dropped out of school, and now he didn't want me to study more than he had.

Grandmother, God rest her soul, was also very unhappy that I was still going to school and constantly harangued Mother. 'Your girl has no skills. When she gets married, they'll send her back within a month.' She told Father, 'Why do you keep spending money on the girl? Girls are useless. They belong to someone else. You work so hard and spend it on her and in the end you'll end up having to spend a lot more to give her away.'

Although Ahmad was almost twenty years old, he didn't have a proper job. He was an errand boy at Uncle Assadollah's store in the bazaar, but he was always roaming around the streets. He wasn't like Mahmoud who was only two years older than him but was serious, dependable and very devout and never missed his prayers or his fasting. Everyone thought Mahmoud was ten years older than Ahmad.

Mother really wanted Mahmoud to marry my maternal cousin, Ehteram-Sadat. She said Ehteram-Sadat was a Seyyed – a descendant of the Prophet. But I knew my brother liked Mahboubeh, my paternal cousin. Every time she came to our house, Mahmoud would blush and start stammering. He would stand in a corner and watch Mahboubeh, especially when her chador slipped off her head. And Mahboubeh, God bless her, was so playful and giddy

that she forgot to keep herself properly covered. Whenever Grandmother scolded her to show some shame in front of a man who was not her immediate kin, she would say, 'Forget it, Grandmother, they're like my brothers!' And she would start laughing out loud again.

I had noticed that as soon as Mahboubeh left, Mahmoud would sit and pray for two hours, and then he kept repeating, 'May God have mercy on our soul! May God have mercy on our soul!' I guess in his mind he had committed a sin. God only knows.

Before our move to Tehran, there was plenty of fighting and quarrelling in the house for a long time. The only thing everyone agreed on was that they had to marry me off and be rid of me. It was as if the entire population of Tehran was waiting for me to arrive so that they could corrupt me. I went to Her Holiness Massoumeh's Shrine every day and pleaded for her to do something so that my family would take me with them and let me go to school. I would cry and say I wished I were a boy or that I might get sick and die like Zari. She was three years older than me, but she caught diphtheria and died when she was eight years old.

Thank God my prayers were answered and not a single soul knocked on our door to ask for my hand in marriage. In due course, Father straightened out his affairs and Uncle Abbas rented a house for us near Gorgan Street. And then everyone just sat around waiting to see what would become of me. Whenever Mother found herself in the company of people she considered worthy, she would comment, 'It's time for Massoumeh to get married.' And I would turn red with humiliation and anger.

But Her Holiness was on my side and no one showed up. Finally, the family somehow got word to an old suitor who had since got married and divorced that he should step forward again. He was financially well off and relatively young, but no one knew why he had divorced his wife after only a few months. To me he looked foul-tempered and scary. When I found out what horror lay ahead, I put all ceremony and modesty aside, threw myself at Father's feet and cried a bucketful of tears until he agreed to take me to Tehran

with them. Father was tender-hearted and I knew he loved me despite the fact that I was a girl. According to Mother, after Zari died he fretted over me; I was very thin and he was afraid I would die, too. He always believed that because he had been ungrateful when Zari was born, God had punished him by taking her away. Who knows, perhaps he had been ungrateful at the time of my birth as well. But I truly loved him. He was the only person in our house who understood me.

Every day when he came home, I would take a towel and go stand next to the reflecting pool. He would put his hand on my shoulder and dip his feet in the pool a few times. Then he would wash his hands and face. I would give him the towel and while drying his face he would peer at me with his light-brown eyes from over the towel in such a way that I knew he loved me and was pleased with me. I wanted to kiss him, but, well, it was inappropriate for a grown girl to kiss a man, even if he was her father. In any case, Father took pity on me and I swore on everything in the world that I would not become corrupted and I would not bring him shame.

Going to school in Tehran became a whole other story. Ahmad and Mahmoud were both against me continuing my education, and Mother believed that taking sewing classes was more imperative. But with my begging, pleading and irrepressible tears I managed to convince Father to stand up to them, and he enrolled me in year eight in secondary school.

Ahmad was so angry he wanted to strangle me and used every excuse to beat me up. But I knew what was really eating away at him and so I kept quiet. My school was not that far from home and a fifteen- to twenty-minute walk. In the beginning Ahmad would secretly follow me, but I would wrap my chador tightly around me and took care not to give him any excuse. Meanwhile, Mahmoud stopped talking to me altogether and completely ignored me.

Eventually, they both found jobs. Mahmoud went to work at a shop in the bazaar that belonged to Mr Mozaffari's brother and Ahmad became an apprentice at a carpenter's workshop in the Shemiran neighbourhood. According to Mr Mozaffari, Mahmoud

sat in the store all day and could be counted on, and Father used to say, 'Mahmoud is the one who's really running Mr Mozaffari's shop.' Ahmad, on the other hand, quickly found plenty of friends and started coming home late at night. Eventually, everyone realised that the stench on him was from drinking alcohol, arak to be precise, but no one said anything. Father would hang his head and refuse to return his hello, Mahmoud would turn away and say, 'May God have mercy. May God have mercy,' and Mother would quickly warm up his food and say, 'My child has a toothache and he has put alcohol on it for the pain.' It wasn't clear what sort of a tooth ailment it was that never healed. In all, Mother was in the habit of covering up for Ahmad. After all, he was her favourite.

Mr Ahmad had also found another pastime at home: keeping an eye on our neighbour Mrs Parvin's house from an upstairs window. Mrs Parvin was usually busy doing something in the front yard and, of course, her chador would always fall off. Ahmad wouldn't move from his position in front of the living room window. Once, I even saw them communicating with signs and gestures.

In any case, Ahmad became so distracted that he forgot all about me. Even when Father allowed me to go to school wearing a headscarf instead of the full chador, there was only one day of shouting and fighting. Ahmad didn't forget, he just stopped scolding me and wouldn't talk to me at all. To him I was the personification of sin. He wouldn't even look at me.

But I didn't care. I went to school, had good grades and made friends with everyone. What else did I want from life? I was truly happy, especially after Parvaneh became my best friend and we promised to never keep any secrets from each other.

Parvaneh Ahmadi was a happy and cheerful girl. She was good at volleyball and was on the school team, but she wasn't doing all that well in her classes. I was sure she wasn't a bad girl, but she didn't abide by many principles. I mean she couldn't tell good from bad and right from wrong and had no clue how to be mindful of her father's good name and honour. She did have brothers, but she wasn't afraid of them. Occasionally, she would even fight with

them and if they hit her, she would hit them back. Everything made Parvaneh laugh and she did so no matter where she was, even out on the street. It was as if no one had ever told her that when a girl laughs her teeth shouldn't show and no one should hear her. She always found it strange that I would tell her it was improper and that she should stop. With a surprised look on her face she would ask, 'Why?' Sometimes she stared at me as if I was from a different world. (Wasn't that the case?) For instance, she knew the names of all the cars and wished her father would buy a black Chevrolet. I didn't know what kind of car a Chevrolet was and I didn't want to lose face by admitting it.

One day I pointed to a beautiful car that looked new and I asked, 'Parvaneh, is that the Chevrolet you like?'

Parvaneh looked at the car and then at me and she burst into laughter and half-screamed, 'Oh how funny! She thinks a Fiat is a Chevrolet.'

I was red up to my ears and dying of embarrassment, both from her laughter and from my own stupidity in having finally revealed my ignorance.

Parvaneh's family had a radio and a television at home. I had seen a television at Uncle Abbas's house, but we had only a large radio. While Grandmother was alive and whenever my brother Mahmoud was at home, we never listened to music, because it was a sin, especially if the singer was a woman and the song was upbeat. Although Father and Mother were both very religious and knew listening to music was immoral, they weren't as strict as Mahmoud and liked listening to songs. When Mahmoud was out, Mother would turn on the radio. Of course, she kept the volume low so that the neighbours wouldn't hear. She even knew the lyrics to a few songs, especially those by Pouran Shahpouri, and she used to sing quietly in the kitchen.

One day I said, 'Mother, you know a good number of Pouran's songs.'

She jumped like a firecracker and snapped, 'Quiet! What sort of talk is this? Don't you ever let your brother hear you say such things!'

When Father came home for lunch, he would turn on the radio to listen to the news at two o'clock and then he would forget to turn it off. The Golha music programme would start and he would unconsciously start moving his head, nodding in tempo with the music. I don't care what anyone says, I'm sure Father loved Marzieh's voice. When they played her songs, he never said, 'May God have mercy! Turn that thing off.' But when Vighen sang, he would suddenly remember his faith and piety and yell, 'That Armenian is singing again! Turn it off.' Oh, but I loved Vighen's voice. I don't know why, but it always reminded me of Uncle Hamid. From what I can remember, Uncle Hamid was a good-looking man. He was different from his brothers and sisters. He smelled of cologne, which was something rare in my life . . . When I was a child he used to take me in his arms and say to Mother, 'Well done, sister! What a beautiful girl you gave birth to. Thank God she didn't turn out looking like her brothers. Otherwise, you would have had to get a big cask and pickle her!'

And Mother would exclaim, 'Oh! What are you saying? What's ugly about my sons? They're as handsome as can be, it's just that they're a little olive-skinned, and that's not bad. A man isn't supposed to be pretty. From back in the old days it has always been said that a man should be uncomely, ugly and bad-tempered!' She would sing these last words and Uncle Hamid would laugh out loud.

I looked like my father and his sister. People always thought Mahboubeh and I were sisters. But she was prettier than me. I was thin and she was plump, and unlike my straight hair that wouldn't curl no matter what I did, she had a mass of ringlets. But we both had dark-green eyes, fair skin and dimples on our cheeks when we laughed. Her teeth were a bit uneven and she always said, 'You're so lucky. Your teeth are so white and straight.'

Mother and the rest of the family looked different. Their skin was olive-toned, they had black eyes and wavy hair, and they were somewhat fat. Though none of them was as portly as Mother's sister, Aunt Ghamar. Of course, they weren't ugly. Especially not Mother. When she threaded off her facial hair and plucked her

eyebrows, she looked just like the pictures of Miss Sunshine on our plates and dishes. Mother had a mole on the side of her lip and she used to say, 'The day your father came to ask for my hand, he fell in love with me the instant he caught sight of my mole.'

I was seven or eight when Uncle Hamid left. When he came to say goodbye, he took me in his arms, turned to Mother and said, 'Sister, for the love of God don't marry this flower off too soon. Let her get an education and become a lady.'

Uncle Hamid was the first person in our family to travel to the West. I had no image of lands overseas. I thought it was some place like Tehran, except farther away. Once in a while, he would send a letter and photographs to Granny Aziz. The photos were beautiful. I don't know why he was always standing in a garden, surrounded by plants, trees and flowers. Later, he sent a picture of himself with a blonde woman who wasn't wearing hijab. I will never forget that day. It was late afternoon; Granny Aziz came over so that Father could read the letter to her. Father was sitting next to his mother on the floor cushions. He first read the letter to himself and then he suddenly shouted, 'Wonderful! Congratulations! Hamid Agha has got married and here's a picture of his wife.'

Granny Aziz fainted and Grandmother, who had never got along with her, covered her mouth with her chador and chuckled. Mother hit herself on the head. She didn't know whether to swoon or to revive her mother. Finally, when Granny Aziz came to, she drank plenty of hot water and candied sugar and then she said, 'Aren't those people sinners?'

'No! They're not sinners,' Father said with a shrug. 'After all they're well read. They're Armenian.'

Granny Aziz started hitting herself on the head, but Mother grabbed her hands and said, 'For the love of God, stop it. It's not that bad. He has converted her to Islam. Go ask any man you like. A Muslim man can marry a non-Muslim and convert her. And what's more, it merits God's reward.'

Granny Aziz looked at her with listless eyes and said, 'I know. Some of our prophets and imams took non-Muslim wives.'

‘Well, God willing, it is a blessing,’ Father laughed. ‘So, when are you going to celebrate? A foreign wife really calls for a festivity.’

Grandmother frowned and said, ‘God forbid, a daughter-in-law is bad enough, now to top it off this one is foreign, ignorant and clueless about purity and impurity in our faith.’

Granny Aziz, who seemed to have regained her energy, collected herself, and as she got up to leave, she said, ‘A bride is a home’s blessing. We’re not like some people who don’t appreciate their daughter-in-law and think they’ve brought a maid to the house. We cherish our daughters-in-law and are proud of them, especially a Western one!’

Grandmother couldn’t tolerate her boasting and snidely said, ‘Yes, I saw how proud you were of Assadollah Khan’s wife.’ Then she maliciously added, ‘And who knows if she has in fact converted to Islam. Maybe she has made a sinner out of Hamid Agha. In fact, Hamid Agha never had proper faith and practice. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have moved to Sin-estan.’

‘You see, Mostafa Khan?’ Granny Aziz snapped. ‘Did you hear what she said to me?’

Finally, Father intervened and put an end to the squabble.

Granny Aziz quickly threw a large party and bragged to everyone about her Western daughter-in-law. She framed the photograph, put it on the mantelpiece and showed it to the women. But up until the moment she died, she kept asking Mother, ‘Did Hamid’s wife become a Muslim? What if Hamid has become an Armenian?’

After her death, for years we received very little news of Uncle Hamid. Once I took his photographs to school and showed them to my friends. Parvaneh really liked him. ‘He’s so handsome,’ she said. ‘He’s so lucky to have gone to the West. I wish we could go.’

Parvaneh knew all the songs. She was a fan of Delkash. In school, half the girls were Delkash fans and the other half liked Marzieh. I had to become a Delkash fan. Otherwise, Parvaneh wouldn’t stay friends with me. She even knew Western singers. At her home

they had a gramophone and they played records on it. One day she showed it to me. It looked like a small suitcase with a red lid. She said it was the portable type.

The school year had not yet ended and I had already learned a lot. Parvaneh always borrowed my notebooks and lecture notes and sometimes we studied together. She didn't care if she had to come to our house. She was very nice and easygoing and paid no attention to what we had and didn't have.

Our house was relatively small. There were three steps at the front door that opened into the front yard, which had a rectangle reflecting pool in the middle. We had put a large wooden bed on one side of it and on the other side there was a long flowerbed parallel to the pool. I mean its long side was parallel to the short side of the pool. The kitchen, which was always dark and black, was separate from the house and at the end of the yard. The bathroom was next to it. There was a sink outside and we didn't have to use the pool's water pump to wash our hands and faces. Inside the house, to the left of the main door, there were four steps that led to a small landing. The doors to the two downstairs rooms opened here. And then there were stairs that led upstairs where there were two other rooms with an adjoining door. The room in the front was the living room and it had two windows. From one side you could see the yard and part of the street and from the other side you could see Mrs Parvin's house. The windows of the other room, where Ahmad and Mahmoud slept, opened on to the rear courtyard with an open view of the backyard of the house behind ours.

Whenever Parvaneh came over, we would go upstairs and sit in the living room. There wasn't much there. Just a large red carpet, a round table and six bentwood chairs, a big heater in the corner and next to it a few floor cushions and backrests. The only decoration on the wall was a framed carpet with the Van Yakad verse from the Quran on it. There was also a mantelpiece, which Mother had covered with a piece of embroidery and on it she had put the mirror and the candelabras from her marriage ceremony.

Parvaneh and I would sit on the floor cushions and whisper, giggle and study. Under no circumstances was I allowed to go to her house.

'You're not to step inside that girl's house,' Ahmad would bark. 'First of all, she has a jackass brother; second, she is shameless and fickle. To hell with her, even her mother goes around with no hijab.'

And I would say, 'Who in this city wears hijab?' Of course, I would only mumble it under my breath.

One day when Parvaneh wanted to show me her *Woman's Day* magazines, I snuck over to their house for just five minutes. It was so clean and beautiful and they had so many pretty things. There were paintings of landscapes and women on all the walls. In the living room, there were large navy-blue sofas with tassels on the bottom. The windows that overlooked the front yard had velvet curtains in the same colour. The dining room was on the opposite side and it was separated from the living room by curtains. In the main hall there was a television and a few arm-chairs and sofas. The doors to the kitchen, bathroom and toilet were here. They didn't have to constantly cross the front yard in the cold of winter and the heat of summer. The bedrooms were all upstairs. Parvaneh and her younger sister Farzaneh shared a room.

They were so lucky! We didn't have that much space. Although on the face of it we had four rooms, in reality we all lived in the large room downstairs. We ate lunch and dinner there; in the wintertime we set up the *korsi*, and Faati, Ali and I slept there. Father and Mother slept in the room next door where there was a large wooden bed and a wardrobe for our clothes and odds and ends. We each had one shelf for our books. But I had more books than everyone else, so I took two shelves.

Mother liked looking at the pictures in *Woman's Day*. But we kept the magazines hidden from Father and Mahmoud. I used to read the 'At the Crossroads' section and the serial stories and then I would tell them to Mother. I would exaggerate the details so much

that she would come close to tears and I myself would cry all over again. Parvaneh and I had decided that each week, after she and her mother had finished reading the new issue, she would give the magazine to us.

I told Parvaneh that my brothers didn't allow me to go her house. She was surprised and asked, 'Why?'

'Because you have an older brother.'

'Dariush? What's "older" about him? In fact, he's one year younger than us.'

'Still, he's grown up and they say it's not proper.'

She shrugged and said, 'I for one don't understand your customs.' But she stopped insisting that I go over to her house.

I received excellent grades in my end of term exams and the teachers praised me a lot. But at home no one showed any reaction. Mother didn't quite understand what I was telling her.

Mahmoud snapped, 'So what? What do you think you've achieved?'

And Father said, 'Well, why didn't you become the top student in your class?'

With the start of summer, Parvaneh and I were separated. The first few days, she would come over when my brothers were out and we would stand outside the front door and chat. But mother constantly complained. She had forgotten how back in Qum she would spend every afternoon with the women in the neighbourhood, talking and eating watermelon seeds until Father came home. She didn't have any friends or acquaintances in Tehran and the women in the neighbourhood snubbed her. On a few occasions they laughed at her and she got upset. Over time, she forgot her habit of spending the afternoon chit-chatting and so I couldn't talk to my friends either.

On the whole, Mother wasn't happy that we had moved to Tehran. She would say, 'We aren't made for this city. All our friends and relatives are in Qum. I'm all alone here. When your uncle's wife, with all her airs, pays no mind to us, what can we expect of strangers?'

She nagged and complained until she finally convinced Father to send us to Qum to spend the summer at her sister's house. I quipped, 'Everyone goes to a country house for the summer, and you want us to go to Qum?'

Mother glared at me and said, 'You are quick to forget where you're from, aren't you? We lived in Qum all year round and you never complained. Now little missy wants to go to a summertime place! I haven't seen my poor sister for an entire year, I have no news of my brother, I haven't visited the grave of my relatives . . . The summer will be over by the time we spend just a week at each relative's house.'

Mahmoud agreed to let us go to Qum, but he wanted us to stay with Father's sister so that when he came to visit us on the weekends he would have to see only Mahboubeh and our aunt. 'Just stay with Auntie,' he said. 'There's no need for you to stay at everyone's house. If you do, you'll be leaving the door open for all of them to head down to Tehran to stay with us, and it will be one big headache.' (Wonderful! How hospitable!)

'Right!' Mother replied angrily. 'It's fine if we go to your aunt's house and they come here. But God forbid if my poor sister wants to come for a visit.' (What clout! Whack him on the head and put him in his place.)

We went to Qum. I didn't complain too much because Parvaneh and her family were going to spend the summer at her grandfather's garden estate in Golab-Darreh.

We returned to Tehran in the middle of August. Ali had failed a few classes and had to retake his final exams. I don't know why my brothers were so lazy when it came to studying. Poor Father had so many dreams for his sons. He wanted them to become doctors and engineers. Anyway, I was happy to be back home. I couldn't bear our living like vagabonds, moving from one house to another, going from maternal aunt to paternal uncle and from paternal aunt to maternal uncle . . . I especially hated staying with Mother's sister. Her house was like a mosque. She kept asking if we had said our prayers and constantly grumbled that we hadn't said

them properly. And she wouldn't stop bragging about her devoutness and about her husband's relatives who were all mullahs.

A couple of weeks later, Parvaneh and her family also returned to Tehran. And with the start of the school year, my life was again happy and pleasant. I was excited to see my friends and teachers. Unlike the previous year, I was no longer a newcomer and a novice, I wasn't surprised by everything, I didn't make stupid comments, I wrote better and more literary compositions, I was as savvy as the Tehrani girls and I could express my opinions. And for all that, I was grateful to Parvaneh who had been my first and best teacher. That year, I also discovered the joy of reading books other than my textbooks. We passed around romantic novels, read them with many sighs and tears and spent hours discussing them.

Parvaneh made a beautiful opinions scrapbook. Her cousin who had nice handwriting wrote the subject headings for each page and Parvaneh pasted an appropriate picture next to them. All the girls in class, her relatives and a few of her family friends wrote their answers to each question. The comments in response to questions such as what is your favourite colour or what is your favourite book weren't all that interesting. But the answers to what is your opinion about love, have you ever been in love and what key characteristics should an ideal spouse have, were fascinating. Some people blatantly wrote whatever they wanted, without considering what would happen if the scrapbook ended up in the school principal's hands.

I made a poetry scrapbook and I would write my favourite poems in it in neat handwriting. Sometimes I drew a picture next to them or pasted in one of the pictures Parvaneh cut out of foreign magazines for me.

One bright autumn afternoon when Parvaneh and I were walking back from school, she asked me to go to the pharmacy with her so that she could buy an adhesive bandage. The pharmacy was midway between school and home. Dr Ataii, the pharmacist, was a dignified old man whom everyone knew and respected. When we

walked in, there was no one behind the counter. Parvaneh called out to the doctor and stood on tiptoes to peer behind the counter. A young man wearing a white uniform was kneeling down, arranging the medicine boxes on the bottom shelves. He got up and asked, 'May I help you?'

Parvaneh said, 'I need an adhesive bandage.'

'Of course. I'll bring one right away.'

Parvaneh jabbed me in the side and whispered, 'Who is he? He's so handsome!'

The young man gave Parvaneh a bandage and as she kneeled down to take money out of her schoolbag she whispered, 'Hey! . . . Look at him. He's so good-looking.'

I looked up at the young man and for an instant our eyes met. A strange sensation ran through my body, I felt my face turn bright red, and I quickly looked down. It was the first time I had experienced such a strange feeling. I turned to Parvaneh and said, 'Come on, let's go.' And I rushed out of the pharmacy.

Parvaneh ran out after me and said, 'What's the matter with you? Haven't seen a human being before?'

'I was embarrassed,' I said.

'Of what?'

'Of the things you say about a man who's a stranger.'

'So what?'

'So what? It's really unseemly. I think he heard you.'

'No he didn't. He heard nothing. And, what exactly did I say that was so bad?'

'That he's handsome and . . .'

'Come on!' Parvaneh said. 'Even if he heard me, he was probably flattered. But between you and me, after I took a better look at him I realised he's not all that good-looking. I have to tell my father that Dr Ataii has hired an assistant.'

The next day we were a little late going to school. But as we hurried past the pharmacy, I saw the young man watching us. On our way back, we looked in through the window. He was busy working, but it seemed as if he could see us. From that day on, in keeping with an unspoken agreement, we saw each other every

morning and every afternoon. And Parvaneh and I found a new and exciting subject to talk about. Soon, news of him spread through the school. The girls were all talking about the handsome young man who had started working at the pharmacy and they came up with all sorts of excuses to go there and somehow attract his attention.

Parvaneh and I got used to seeing him every day and I could swear that he, too, waited for us to walk by. We would argue about which actor he resembled the most and in the end decided that he looked like Steve McQueen. I had come a long way. By then, I knew the names of famous foreign actors. Once I forced Mother to go to the cinema with me. She really enjoyed it. From then on, once a week and unbeknownst to Mahmoud, we would go to the cinema at the corner. It mostly featured Indian films, which made Mother and me cry like rain from the clouds.

Parvaneh was quick to find information about the assistant pharmacist. Dr Ataii who was friends with her father had said, 'Saiid is a student of pharmacology at the university. He's a good kid. He's from Rezaieh.'

From then on, the looks we exchanged became more familiar and Parvaneh came up with a nickname for him – Haji Worrywart. She said, 'He looks like he's always waiting and worried, as if he's searching for someone.'

That year was the best year of my life. Everything was going my way. I was studying hard, my friendship with Parvaneh was growing stronger every day and we were gradually becoming one soul in two bodies. The only thing that darkened my bright and happy days was my horror of the whispers around the house that became more frequent as the end of the school year approached and which could put a stop to my education.

'It's impossible,' Parvaneh said. 'They would never do that to you.'

'You don't understand. They don't care whether I am doing well at school or not. They say anything beyond the first three years of secondary school doesn't do a girl any good.'

‘The first three years?!’ Parvaneh said, surprised. ‘These days even a school diploma isn’t enough any more. All the girls in my family are going to university. Of course, only the ones who passed the entrance exams. You will definitely pass. You’re smarter than them.’

‘Forget about university! I wish they would just let me finish secondary school.’

‘Well, you have to stand up to them.’

The things Parvaneh said! She had no idea what my circumstances were. I could stand up to Mother, talk back to her and defend myself. But I didn’t have the courage to be as outspoken in front of my brothers.

At the end of the last term we took our final exams and I became the second top student in my class. Our literature teacher really liked me and when we received our report cards she said, ‘Well done! You’re very talented. What field of study are you going to pursue?’

‘My dream is to study literature,’ I said.

‘That’s excellent. As a matter of fact, I was going to suggest it to you.’

‘But ma’am, I can’t. My family is against it. They say three years of secondary school is enough for a girl.’

Mrs Bahrami frowned, shook her head and walked into the administration office. A few minutes later she came out with the school principal. The principal took my report card and said, ‘Sadeghi, tell your father to come to school tomorrow. I would like to see him. And tell him I won’t give you your report card unless he comes. Don’t forget!’

That night when I told Father that the school principal wanted to see him, he was surprised. He asked, ‘What have you done?’

‘I swear, nothing.’

Then he turned to Mother and said, ‘Missus, go to the school and see what they want.’

‘No, Father, that won’t do,’ I said. ‘They want to see you.’

‘What do you mean? I’m not going to walk into a girls’ school!’

‘Why? All the other fathers come. They said if you don’t come, they won’t give me my report card.’

He knotted his eyebrows in a deep frown. I poured tea for him and tried to endear myself a little. 'Father, do you have a headache? Do you want me to bring you your pills?' I tucked a floor cushion behind him and brought him a glass of water. In the end, he agreed to go to school with me the next day.

When we walked into the principal's office, she got up from behind her desk, greeted Father warmly and offered him a seat close to her. 'I congratulate you, your daughter is very special,' she said. 'Not only is she doing well in her classes, but she is very well mannered and pleasant.' Still standing at the door, I looked down and involuntarily smiled. The principal turned to me and said, 'My dear Massoumeh, please wait outside. I'd like to speak with Mr Sadeghi.'

I don't know what she said to him, but when Father walked out, his face was flushed, his eyes were twinkling and he was looking at me with kindness and pride. He said, 'Let's go to the supervisor's office right now and enrol you for next year. I don't have time to come back later.'

I was so happy I thought I would faint. Walking behind him, I kept saying, 'Thank you, Father. I love you. I promise to be the top student in class. I'll do whatever you ask. May God let me give my life for you.'

He laughed and said, 'Enough! I only wish your indolent brothers had a tiny bit of you in them.'

Parvaneh was waiting outside. She had been so worried she hadn't slept a wink the night before. With signs and gestures she asked, what happened? I put on a sad face, shook my head and shrugged. It was as if her tears were waiting behind her eyes, because all of a sudden they started to roll down her face. I ran over to her, took her in my arms and said, 'No! I lied. It's all right. I'm registered for next year.'

Out in the schoolyard, we were jumping up and down, laughing like lunatics and wiping away our tears.

Father's decision raised havoc at home. Still, he stood firm and said, 'The school principal said she is very talented and will

become someone important.' And I, delirious and giddy, didn't care what any of them said. Even Ahmad's hatred-filled leers didn't frighten me.

Summer came and although it meant that Parvaneh and I would again be apart, I was happy with the knowledge that the next school year would bring us together again. We spent only one week in Qum, and every week Parvaneh found some excuse to visit Tehran with her father and came to see me. She kept insisting that I go with them to Golab-Darreh for a few days. I really wanted to go, but I knew my brothers would never agree and so I didn't even bring up the subject. Parvaneh said that if her father spoke to my father, he could convince him to let me go. But I didn't want to create more headaches for Father. I knew saying no to Mr Ahmadi was difficult for him, as was having to deal with the fights and arguments at home. Instead, to gain Mother's favour, I agreed to take sewing classes, so that I would at least have one talent when I went to my husband's house.

Coincidentally, the sewing school was on the road next to the pharmacy. Saiid quickly caught on to my every-other-day schedule and, no matter how, he would make his way to the door on time. One block away from the pharmacy, my heart would start pounding and my breathing would become more rapid. I would try not to look towards the pharmacy and not to blush, but it was no use. Each time our eyes met, I turned red up to my ears. It was so embarrassing. And he, bashfully and with an eager look in his eyes, would greet me with a nod.

One day as I turned the corner, he suddenly appeared in front of me. I became so flustered that I dropped my sewing ruler. He bent down, picked it up and with his eyes cast down quietly said, 'I'm sorry I frightened you.'

I said, 'No,' grabbed the ruler from him and scurried away. For a long time, I wasn't myself. Every time I remembered that moment I would blush and feel a pleasant tremor in my heart. I don't know why, but I was sure he was experiencing the same feelings.

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With the first autumn winds and the early days of September, our long wait came to an end and Parvaneh and I headed back to school. There was no end to all the things we wanted to tell each other. We had to share everything that had happened over the summer, everything we had done and even thought. But ultimately, all our conversations kept coming back to Saiid.

‘Tell me the truth,’ Parvaneh said. ‘How many times did you go to the pharmacy while I was away?’

‘I swear I never went there,’ I said. ‘I was too embarrassed.’

‘Why? He has no clue what we think and talk about.’

‘So you think!’

‘No way. Has he said anything? How do you know?’

‘No. I just think so.’

‘Well, we can pretend we don’t know anything and just do our own thing.’

But the truth was that something had changed. My meetings with Saiid had taken on a different tone and colour and felt more serious. In my heart, I felt a strong, though unspoken, bond with him and hiding it from Parvaneh wasn’t easy. We had been going to school for only a week when she found her first excuse to go to the pharmacy and dragged me along with her. I felt so self-conscious. It was as if the entire city knew what was going on in my heart and they were all watching me. When Saiid saw us walk in, he just froze where he stood. Parvaneh asked him for aspirin a few times, but he couldn’t hear her. Finally, Dr Ataii came over, said hello to Parvaneh and asked about her father. Then he turned to Saiid and said, ‘Why are you just standing there looking dumb-founded? Give the young lady a box of aspirin.’

By the time we walked out, everything had been exposed. ‘Did you see the way he was looking at you?’ Parvaneh asked, surprised.

I said nothing. She turned and stared into my eyes.

‘Why have you turned so pale? You look like you’re about to faint!’

‘Me? No! There’s nothing wrong with me.’

But my voice was shaking. We walked in silence for a few minutes. Parvaneh was deep in thought.

‘Parvaneh, what is it? Are you all right?’

Suddenly, she exploded like a firecracker and in a voice louder than usual she snapped, ‘You are so mean. I am as stupid as you are cunning. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Tell you what? There was nothing to tell.’

‘Right! You two have something going on. I would have to be blind not to see it. Tell me the truth; how far have you two gone?’

‘How could you say such a thing?’

‘Stop it! Stop playing the mouse. You are capable of anything. From that headscarf to now this love affair! Stupid me! And all this time I thought he kept popping up in front of us because of me. You’re so sly. Now I understand why they say people from Qum are shrewd. You didn’t even tell me, your best friend. I tell you everything. Especially something this important.’

There was a big lump in my throat. I grabbed her arm and pleaded, ‘Please, swear that you won’t tell anyone. Don’t speak so loud on the street, it’s not proper. Be quiet, people will hear. I swear on my father’s life, I swear on the Quran, there is nothing going on.’

But like a flood gaining force, Parvaneh was getting angrier by the minute.

‘You really are a traitor. And you write in my scrapbook that you don’t think about such things, that the only thing that’s important to you is studying, men are a no-no, they’re bad, it’s wrong to speak of such things, it’s a sin . . .’

‘I’m begging you, please stop. I swear on the Quran, there is nothing going on between us.’

We were near her house when I finally broke down and started to cry. My tears brought her back to her senses and like water snuffed out the flames of her anger. In a gentler voice, she said, ‘Now why are you crying? And out on the street! I’m just upset because I don’t understand why you kept it from me. I tell you everything.’

I swore that I had always been her best friend and that I never had and never would keep secrets from her.

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Together, Parvaneh and I experienced all the stages of love. She was as excited as I was and kept asking, 'What do you feel now?' As soon as she saw me deep in thought, she would say, 'Tell me, what you are thinking about?' And I would talk about my fantasies, my anxieties, my excitement, my worries about the future and the fear of being forced to marry someone else. She would close her eyes and say, 'Oh, how poetic! So this is what falling in love is like. But I'm not as sensitive and emotional as you. Some of the things people in love do and say make me laugh. And I never blush. So how will I know when I'm in love?'

The beautiful and vibrant autumn days passed as quickly as the autumn winds. Saiid and I had still not exchanged a single word. But now, each time Parvaneh and I walked past the pharmacy, he would quietly murmur a hello and my heart would plunge in my chest like a ripe fruit dropping into a basket.

Every day, Parvaneh unearthed some new information about Saiid. I knew he was from Rezaieh, and his mother and sisters still lived there; he was from a well-respected family; his last name was Zareii; his father had passed away a few years ago; he was in the third year at university studying pharmacology; he was very smart and studious; and Dr Ataii trusted him implicitly and was pleased with his work. Every piece of information was a stamp of approval on my pure and innocent love. I felt as though I had known him all my life and that I would spend the rest of my existence with him alone.

Once or twice a week, Parvaneh would find some excuse to take me to the pharmacy. We would secretly exchange glances. His hands would shake and my cheeks would turn bright red. Parvaneh carefully monitored our every action. Once she said, 'I always wondered what eye-gazing was. Now I know!'

'Parvaneh! What sort of talk is that?'

'What? Am I lying?'

In the mornings, I took particular care doing my hair and I put on my headscarf in a way that my bangs would remain tidy and my

long hair could be seen from the back. I tried desperately to put in a few ringlets, but my hair just wouldn't curl. And then one day Parvaneh said, 'You idiot! Your hair is beautiful. Straight hair is the latest fashion. Haven't you heard, the girls at school actually iron their hair to make it straight.'

I regularly washed and ironed my school uniform. I begged Mother to buy more fabric and have a seamstress make a new one for me – what Mother herself sewed was always dowdy and drab. The only thing I had learned in my sewing classes was to find fault with Mother's sewing. Mrs Parvin made a stylish uniform for me and I secretly asked her to shorten the skirt a little. Still, I had the longest uniform in school. I saved my money and Parvaneh and I went shopping. I bought a forest-green silk headscarf. Parvaneh said, 'It really suits you. It makes your eyes look greener.'

We had a cold winter that year. The snow on the streets had yet to melt when it would snow again. In the mornings, there was ice everywhere and we had to take care crossing the street. Every day someone would slip and fall and that day it was my turn. I was near Parvaneh's house when I lost my footing on a patch of ice and fell down hard. I tried to get up, but my ankle hurt terribly. The moment I put my foot on the ground, pain shot all the way up to my waist and I fell back down. Just then, Parvaneh walked out of her house and Ali who was on his way to school also showed up. They helped me get up and walked me back home. Mother bandaged my ankle, but by late afternoon both the pain and the swelling had got much worse. When the men returned home, they each offered an opinion. Ahmad said, 'Forget it . . . there's nothing wrong with her. If she had stayed home like a decent girl and hadn't gone out in this blistering cold, this wouldn't have happened.' And he went off to drink.

Father said, 'Let's take her to the hospital.'

'Wait,' Mahmoud said, 'Mr Esmail is good at binding broken bones. He lives right at the turn of Shemiran. I'll go bring him. If he says she has broken her leg, then we'll take her to the hospital.'

Mr Esmail was about Father's age and famous for splinting fractured bones. That winter, his business was booming. He examined

my foot and said I hadn't broken any bones and that it was only a sprain. He put my foot in warm water and started to massage it. He kept talking to me and just as I was about to say something he suddenly twisted my foot. I screamed in pain and fainted. When I came to, he was rubbing my ankle with a concoction of egg yolk, turmeric and a thousand different oils. Then he bandaged it and cautioned me not to walk on it for two weeks.

What a catastrophe. I wept and said, 'But I have to go to school. The second term exams are starting soon.' I knew the exams were a month and a half away and that my tears were flowing for an entirely different reason.

For a few days I really couldn't move. I was sprawled out under the *korsi*, thinking about Saiid. In the mornings, when everyone was at school, I would fold my hands under my head and, with the feeble winter sun shining on my face, I would drown in my sweet fantasies and travel to the town of my dreams, to the blissful days of the future and to a life with Saiid . . .

The only bother in the morning was Mrs Parvin who would find any and all excuses to visit Mother. I really didn't like her and as soon as I heard her voice, I would pretend to be asleep. I don't know why Mother, who went on and on about faith and decency, had become friends with a woman who the entire neighbourhood knew didn't quite walk the straight and narrow, and she hadn't caught on that Mrs Parvin's pandering was all because of Ahmad.

In the afternoon when Faati and Ali came back from school, the calm and quiet of the house would vanish. Ali could single-handedly wreak hell and havoc in an entire neighbourhood. He had become disobedient and cheeky. He was trying to follow in Ahmad's footsteps and was almost as harsh with me as Ahmad was, especially now that I wasn't going to school. Mother was taking care of me and Father was showing concern, which made Ali jealous. He acted as if I had cheated him out of his rights. He would leap over the *korsi*, harass Faati and make her scream, he would kick my books aside and intentionally or accidentally hit my injured ankle and make me shriek in pain. One day, with much begging and crying, I managed to convince Mother to move my bedding

upstairs to the living room so that I would be safe from Ali and could study a little.

‘Why do you want to go up and down these stairs?’ she argued. ‘And it’s cold upstairs, the large heater is broken.’

‘The small heater is enough for me.’

In the end, she gave in and I moved upstairs. I was finally at peace. I studied, I daydreamed, I wrote in my poetry scrapbook, I went on long journeys in my fantasies, I wrote Saïd’s name here and there in my notebook in the script I had invented. I found the root of his name in Arabic and I listed its inflectional paradigms – Sa’ad, Saïd, Sa’adat – and I used them in all the examples I had to provide in my homework.

One day Parvaneh came to visit me. While Mother was there, we talked about school and the exams that were due to start on 5 March, but as soon as she left, Parvaneh said, ‘You have no idea what has been going on.’

I knew she had news of Saïd. I leaped halfway up and said, ‘Tell me, please, how is he? Quick, tell me before someone walks in.’

‘Lately, he’s been Haji Worrywart. Every day, I saw him standing on the pharmacy steps, peering around, and as soon as he realised I was alone, his face would sag, and looking grief-stricken he would go back inside. Today he showed some courage and came forward. At first he turned red and white a few times, then stammered a hello and finally he said, “Your friend hasn’t been going to school for a few days. I’m very worried. Is she well?” I was wicked. I played dumb and said, “Which friend are you referring to?” He looked at me with surprise and said, “The young lady who is always with you. Her house is on Golshan Street.” So he even knows where you live! He’s a sly one. He has probably followed us. I said, “Oh, you mean Massoumeh Sadeghi. The poor thing fell and sprained her ankle and she can’t go to school for two weeks.” He turned pale, said it was terrible, then just turned his back to me and walked away. I wanted to call to him and tell him he was very rude, but he had barely taken two steps when he realised how

impolite he had been. He turned around and said, "Please tell her I said hello." Then he said goodbye like a normal human being and left.'

My heart and my voice were trembling. 'Oh my God!' I said, panicked. 'You told him my name?'

'Don't be a ninny,' Parvaneh said, 'It's no big deal. To begin with, he already knew it, or at least he knew your last name. You can be sure he has even researched your ancestry. He's so in love. I think one of these days he's going to come and ask for your hand.'

I was delirious. I was so giddy that when Mother walked in with a tray of tea, she looked at me with surprise and said, 'What's going on? You're so chipper!'

'No!' I stammered. 'There's nothing going on.'

Parvaneh quickly jumped in and said, 'You see, today they returned our exam papers and Massoumeh got the highest grades.' And then she winked at me.

'What's the use, my girl? These things are not practical for a girl,' Mother said. 'She's wasting her time. Pretty soon she'll have to go to her husband's house and wash nappies.'

'No, Mother. I'm not going to a husband's house any time soon. For now, I have to get my school diploma.'

Parvaneh mischievously said, 'Yes, and then she'll become Mrs Doctor.'

I glowered at her.

'Oh really?' Mother quipped. 'She's going to continue studying? The more she goes to school the cheekier she gets. It's all her father's fault for doting on her, as if she's so special.'

And still grumbling, Mother walked out and Parvaneh and I burst out laughing.

'Thank God Mother didn't catch on, otherwise she would have said, since when do you become a doctor with a diploma in literature?'

Parvaneh, wiping away the tears of laughter rolling down her cheeks, said, 'My silly girl, I didn't say you are going to be a doctor, I said you will be the missus of a Mr Doctor.'

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