Hot Summer Days

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By Farideh Goldin

Aziza glanced at her mother as she drove her brown Volkswagen Rabbit on Interstate 10 toward New Orleans. Being frightened by the idea of flying alone from Tel Aviv and switching planes at JFK airport, Shokat had asked Aziza to meet her in New York, but that would have meant two extra days away from work and unnecessary expenses Aziza couldn't afford, something her mother didn't understand. And in a place very deep within her, Aziza had hoped that Shokat would have changed her mind, giving into her fears of travelling alone.

The meeting at the airport had been nice enough. Her mother reached out to her and held her tightly for a long time the way children embrace their mothers when they still don't have the vocabulary to express their feelings. Aziza had wondered if her mother was just happy to have survived the flight by herself, but then she saw the tears in Shokat's eyes. It was a combination of the two emotions, probably more of relief than love. She never did like doing anything alone. Aziza felt guilty for being so ambivalent toward her mother's visit. She had yielded to Shokat's hug grudgingly, returned the kisses on both cheeks politely.

Aziza's rear view was obstructed with a heavy rectangular trunk. Shokat had brought everything she owned, Aziza thought, like children who cannot choose just one stuffed animal when getting ready to spend the night at Grandma's. Shokat remained silent during the drive from the airport. Aziza's face burned from Shokat's continuous stare. She thinks I am an anomaly,Aziza thought, a sport of nature. Aziza tried to break the silence by pointing out various tourist attractions to her. She showed her mother the large graveyard as they passed through Metairie, telling Shokat how the dead were buried in the walls and in mausoleums above ground. Being below sea level, the land was too saturated to accept anything solid for long. Shokat looked confused or maybe frightened; her eyes opened wide; her body moved away from the window. Coming from a desert climate she probably couldn't comprehend the idea of so much water in the ground, the land rejecting the bodies, spewing them out of its dark womb. How stupid I am, Aziza thought, stupid! She was spooking the poor woman. Away from Iran for just a few years, Aziza had already forgotten the culture, or maybe she had never understood it to start with. She had never fit there anyway. Whenever Aziza left for a trip or returned from one, Shokat had held a Jewish Bible, the first page engraved with the names of generations of men and women who had come before them, over Aziza's head to kiss and to pass under. Not knowing Hebrew, Shokat had made up her own prayers, summoning the spirits of the ancestors and God's compassion and mercy to protect her daughter. Instead, Aziza was taking her mother by a graveyard, telling her about the dead on her arrival. How could she have forgotten that it was bad luck to speak of such matters?

"Don't worry, Maman. It is just for the American tourists," Aziza comforted Shokat. "Do you remember going to the gravesides of the great poets in Shiraz? Sadee and Hafez? It's the same thing except here people just wander around and look at the architecture." A look of puzzlement settled on Shokat's face. "You know," Aziza continued, "like how they are made and what kind of statues they have." Aziza looked at her mother from the corner of her eyes as she took the Carrolton exit. Shokat's hands were not as tightly intertwined. Her body was not leaning toward Aziza. *Just the two of them. Just the two of them with nothing to say to each other for an entire week.* Aziza shivered at the thought.

She pulled the car into the parking lot of Winn-Dixie at the corner of Carrolton and St. Charles Blvd, looked for a spot in the shade and found it easily. Most Americans preferred the closest spot, she had learned in the five years living in the U.S. Even in such intense summer heat, most did not think of the lower temperature in the shade and chose the convenience of fewer steps to the front door.

Shokat sat in the passenger seat quietly, her hands folded on top of each other on her lap, her eyes heavy with sleep.

"Maman, I need to pick up some groceries. I know you're tired from the long flight, but it should take only a few minutes."

Shokat nodded for an okay, not even a word yet after so many years.

"Do you want to put your wallet and your ticket in the glove compartment?"

"No ticket." Shokat passed her the wallet with creased bills stuffed inside.

"What did you do with it?" Aziza asked in alarm. "Did you lose it?"

"No, just one ticket for coming."

"A one-way ticket? It's almost the same price to buy a round trip, Maman." Aziza worried about the extra expenses, calculating her savings quietly.

"Don't worry," Shokat said, her words almost inaudible.

Baba had to buy the ticket, Aziza thought; she was not wasting her money on such thoughtless stupidity.

At the grocery store, Shokat looked at every item in wonderment. It was the same reaction she herself had had the first time she encountered an American supermarket, so many things in such a large space all indoors, secure from the elements. Her mother had shopped only in open markets, a stall for vegetables and fruit, one for spices, one for household goods. In Iran, sometimes they were not even in the same area. After the Iranian Revolution and the family's escape to Israel, not knowing any Hebrew, she frequented similar stores run by other Iranian refugees.

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In Iran, Aziza had shopped for her mother on Fridays, her day off, when Shokat had been busy with preparation for Shabbat. She bought vegetables for the salad and stew from one stall and let the shopkeeper throw them in her plastic basket. Then she went to the *baghali* to buy yogurt and a few eggs. She carried her own ceramic bowl and put it on top of a newspaper page on the scale. The man dropped a few dollops of yogurt in it, careful not to touch the sides of the bowl. If it was over the amount she wanted, it was too bad; it was hers; it was in a Jewish bowl and was already *najes*, made impure by her invisible filth. She always felt lopsided as she carried the plastic bags in each hand, one full and one empty, to the bakery. She waited in the corner. The baker took each hot crisp flat bread out of the open *tanoor* and threw it on the counter. Whenever one was rejected by other customers, a bit too doughy, a bit too burned, the baker set them aside for her. There was no use arguing. "Take it or leave it," the baker always told her, winking at her as if she was a cheap whore. Male customers looked up and down her body as if she was naked; the maids waiting in line avoided her touch.

Aziza gave up shopping for her mother when in college. Instead she went on picnics with her classmates, discovering the exhilaration of climbing the mountain outside the city, visiting a hermit living in a cave. She had told her mother that men should pick up the groceries since they would not be harassed as much. Instead, Shokat had done the shopping herself as if to prove her victimization. Aziza had seen her mother a few times carrying the two baskets underneath her *chador*, holding the corners of the fabric with her teeth so it wouldn't slip off her head. Aziza didn't care. She didn't have to take the abuse herself.

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Now in Winn Dixie, Aziza went through the cucumbers in the produce section. They were large and yellow and, no doubt, full of seeds. One thing she still missed from Iran, she realized, was the produce. The cucumbers were as delicate as Persian miniatures. With no wax or chemicals, they didn't need peeling. She missed their crunch between her teeth. She missed little things about home the most, and invariably became infuriated at herself for still holding on to such trivialities.

"They say anything to you?" Shokat mumbled as Aziza went through the cucumbers and picked only the firm ones.

"Who? Say what?"

"They know you are Jewish?"

"I don't know. Why would it matter?"

"Touching the food; don't get upset?"

"Maman!" Aziza's face turned red. "It doesn't matter what religion I am. I can touch anything I want and no one will dare to tell me I am making them impure." She was surprised that her hands trembled. Why was she allowing her past life to bother her, over nothing, just nothing?

"Can't talk to you. Getting mad for nothing," Shokat said from under her breath.

She looked hurt, distant. Afraid? Could her mother be afraid of her? A sudden thought crossed Aziza's mind. Could her mother be afraid of disagreeing? She was never allowed to contradict her husband, her mother-in-law, her brothers-in-law, the entire family—a stranger in her own home. Aziza hated herself for not having more patience with her mother. She had to remember her mother's hardship, to be good to her, to be kind even when she wanted to scream at her, even when she didn't want her visiting.

Shokat followed her daughter down the aisles. If Aziza touched a cereal box, so did she. "Ceral, ceeraall," she practiced her English. "Meelk, yugoort," she giggled loudly, entertained by her own voice pronouncing the unfamiliar words. A few customers looked at them, annoyed at Shokat's low-pitched voice.

In the bakery, Aziza enjoyed the look of the bewilderment on Shokat's face. She touched the long loaves of French bread in a basket, stared at the baker slicing a round loaf of sourdough bread.

"*Inam nooneh*, bread too?"

"Yes," Aziza pointed to the packages of pita bread, "that's the closest to Iranian bread."

"Everything in plastic?" Shokat pulled at the wrapper around the pita.

Aziza nodded in agreement, reaching to pick a few packages.

"Maman!" Aziza said in alarm as Shokat picked up a loaf of wheat bread, absentmindedly squeezing it in its brown cellophane wrap.

"Let her go buy her own *naan* if she doesn't like what I get."

"What did you say, Maman? Which bread?"

"*Cheezi nist*, nothing."

"Maman, why are you so upset? Did something happen?"

"No. Your grandmother always complained about the bread. I couldn't do nothing right."

There was no distance far enough from the clutch of family hatred. Why couldn't she have told her mother not to come? And the ticket, Aziza remembered with exasperation. One more thing to worry about. She grabbed the loaf from Shokat, put it back on the shelf and led her to the cash register, not bothering to reply to the familiar bewailing. She felt anxious; an invisible hand reached from afar and pulled her back into darkness. She pushed back. She could control this.

"No weighing!" Shokat said.

"There is a scale built into the counter," Aziza explained, hating the way her mother spoke to no one in particular, as if by mumbling the words she could dissociate herself from her own words, take them back quickly if necessary. Shokat put her hand on the counter, pushed down, trying to figure out the mechanics of the invisible scale. The cashier looked at them annoyed. The customers behind them fidgeted. Aziza took her mother's arm. With her other hand, she pushed the cart out to the heat and the humidity building up under the clear skies of New Orleans.

They were both sweaty when they reached Aziza's cool silent apartment. Aziza was exhausted from carrying the trunk. *What is in this? A dead body?* She was tempted to ask Shokat. Not a good idea, she decided, a bad joke she would not understand. Just a few minutes in her place and Aziza was calm again. She grated the cucumbers in a bowl of yogurt, added pepper and crushed mint leaves. The two sat cross-legged around the coffee table and ate their *mast-o-khiar* with warm pita, and washed it down with mint tea. For a short time, Aziza felt at home. She almost reached out to hold her mother's hand, to give her a kiss on her forehead, but she hesitated and the moment passed. Aziza took the dishes into the kitchen. Shokat followed her every step quietly like a child following her mother, afraid to lose her in a crowd.

"Maman, why don't you go to bed? You must be exhausted."

"You going to bed?" She followed Aziza to the living room.

"No, I am going to sit in the sofa for a while and read. You must be suffering from jet lag. Go in the bedroom and try to take a nap."

"Not now."

"Do you want me to help you unpack?" Aziza had an urge to move the sarcophagus-looking box out of her vision.

"Later." Shokat sat in the rocking chair.

Aziza sat on the sofa with her back toward the box. For the first time she wished she had a TV set like all normal Americans, to entertain, to pacify her mother.

She couldn't concentrate on the book. The air-conditioning unit in the window clanged, fanning cold air onto her face with a loud whoosh. How much longer, Aziza wondered, could the old machine hold up to the intense heat and humidity building outside. Through the sheer draperies, she could see the heat waves rising from the pavement on the street. The large leaves on the old magnolia tree drooped listlessly over the porch, blocking her view of the hectic mid-day traffic on St. Charles Blvd. Big southern flies whizzed by and hit against the windowpane in kamikaze-like crashes, splattering white and black gooey flesh. She was happy the air-conditioner drowned their buzzing noise, the sound of their bodies smashing to their deaths. A familiar dark mood crept over her like an abusive lover. She couldn't concentrate on her book, to lose herself in its imaginary world.

Aziza lifted her legs and rested them on the sofa, somewhere deep down knowing that she was being impolite and disrespectful to her mother by not offering her the comfortable sofa, for having her feet up in front of her, for wearing shorts instead of a skirt. She pushed the annoying thoughts away. Those were the rules of etiquette of a different world to which she no longer belonged.

"Your legs are like columns," her mother said. "You've got them from your father's side of family." Shokat lifted her skirt to prove her point.

Aziza bit her lower lip and tried to stay calm. Why did her mother think she could bring Aziza to her side if she proved that her father's family hated her? Didn't she know how hurtful that was? But why should she be any different from her father? Aziza remembered a similar conversation. "Your mother is low-class. I don't know how I got involved with that family." Aziza shook her head as if to shake the water out of her long hair after a shower. She was not going to acquiesce to this insanity. She was going to read her book and lose herself in it. Shokat had to be exhausted. Maybe she would give up on her and take a nap if Aziza remained silent. She tried again to concentrate on her book.

Aziza's face burned with her mother's mad gaze as if Shokat were trying to get under her skin and inside her mind. Aziza turned her head and stared back. Deep frown lines etched the sides of Shokat's lips. When did she become so old? Her hair, chopped off in a cheap haircut, looked frizzy and matted. Aziza thought of the long tight curls she used to play with as a child, sitting on her mother's lap, listening to the nursery rhymes she sang so softly. She used to pull at the springy ringlets and laugh with delight. Now she longed to reach and caress the long lost curls, to hear her mother's beautiful song again. They had once been children together. Her mother resented her daughter's maturity.

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Shokat used to put Aziza on her lap and ask her to cup her right hand like a flower. She circled Aziza's palm with her index finger, "*Hoozakoo bloor bloor,* around a little marble pool, little birds perched." She folded Aziza's fingers one at a time, "One flew away to find water, one to buy bread, one to the fruit stall, one to the vegetable market. Only one little bird remained to eat with her mother, yum-yum." Aziza always thought she was the bird who stayed behind until she realized her siblings had thought the same. She wondered if the others had ever noticed there had been no mother bird around the pool.

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"You are an old maid," Shokat said, rocking herself in the high-backed wooden chair.

Aziza's stomach churned. Her mouth tasted sour. Why did she allow Shokat to put her down each time? She had never been able to talk to her, to tell her of her problems, of her insecurities, to cry in her arms even when she was a child. She had missed having a real mother. She wished for the stranger sitting in front of her to disappear.

Aziza had an urge to confront her mother this time. She turned her head toward Shokat but couldn't open her mouth. Shokat was dressed in a shabby, shapeless beige cotton dress. Aziza had bought her new clothes but she always saved them for rare special events that never came. Not wearing bras, her shriveled breasts hung long and lifeless. Her stomach protruded from underneath the faded pink flowers like a giant prune, as if she had just given birth to her. Aziza felt a surge of guilt and compassion. Her mother's life had been hard; she was married as a child-bride to a man she had never seen, entering her mother-in-law's house poor and without much dowry. She was legally sold into slavery, prostitution. Aziza shivered at the thought. Her mother has stopped maturing the day she was given away in marriage; she was still a child in the body of a seventy-year-old woman.

Aziza was holding the book upside down. She turned it around quickly and shut it. Why was she here? Aziza had not invited her. Why had she, her always irresponsible mother with no return-ticket, gone to the trouble of such a long trip just to pick an argument with her?

"Maman, what have I done to deserve this? You've not seen me in five years, but you're putting me down already."

"Me? Put you down? Your father's family puts you down. It is them—ashes on their heads—who hate you. I defend you."

A nagging memory reminded Aziza why she had never engaged in an argument with her mother. It was simply useless. She always backed out quickly, even lied about the words she had uttered minutes earlier. Aziza had played that game with her classmates in the elementary school. Even then she had avoided friends who couldn't have an honest argument.

"Maman, aren't you tired? If you take a nap now, we can go to the Audubon Zoo later. It's too hot to venture out now."

"You separated yourself from the family. We are humans, too. You forgot I gave birth to you. What's the use of a girl?"

Aziza knew all the details of her birth from her mother and other women of the family, who had wanted to ingratiate themselves to her and her father. Her mother had given birth to all of them, two dead, five alive, without prenatal care or anesthetics, away from her family, squatting on bloody clay and hay, screaming, tearing. The thought frightened her. Aziza's birth had been the hardest, the first child born to a fourteen-year-old in the dead of winter with no heat in a missionary hospital.

"Such a difficult trip! You are all alone in this foreign land. Your father didn't want me to come."

"You should have not come. I can take care of myself."

"You're stiff-necked. You think you don't need anyone."

"I just don't want to make trouble for you. I'm quite fine. It was my choice to be here. I'm happy," Aziza said. *A whole week, a whole long wasted week*. She needed to take care of the ticket as soon as possible.

"Do you remember coming to me soaked in your own urine? Such a big girl! Your uncle Manouchehr dragged you in with pee-stained pants. I had to clean you up. I was embarrassed for both of us. No reward for mothers."

Aziza remembered the day just too well. She was six years old. Only a child. They still lived in the old house in the Jewish ghetto with an outhouse at the end of the long bricked backyard. It was hot. The sun was burning her face. She had to go badly. Someone was using the toilet. She waited. When her aunt came out, her grandmother arrived. She needed to let her go first out of respect. She was older and Aziza was only a child. Finally it was her turn. She could see the hole in the ground behind the creaky wooden door with buzzing mosquitoes hovering around it. But Manouchehr showed up. Aziza backed away. He had asked if she was sure. Aziza was sure. She knew her place. Manouchehr came out after a long long time, examined her and smiled. Aziza had her legs tightly together. Large flies swarmed her. She didn't attempt to swat them away. Her lips tasted salty and bitter. A warm, yellow stream ran down her legs and gathered in a puddle around her feet.

Her mother had spanked her over and over with hatred in her eyes, screaming, "A woman's life is worthless." Aziza had been confused. She drew a line between herself and her mother then and never trusted her with anything in her heart.

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Aziza felt a fine layer of sweat covering her body like dew on the flower petals on cool early mornings at home. A slight tremor seized the control over her muscles. Why was her mother recreating the past? Was this normal to relive her past with such vivid details? It was madness, just sheer madness. A dark ghost was taking over her mind and body; she feared losing touch with the present reality.

She stood abruptly and took two long steps to the trunk, knelt by it and opened the lock. She had to keep herself busy or she would go mad.

“Maman, why do you have a winter coat here?” She pulled a long fuzzy coat out. She knew that color, a mix of brown and yellow, the color of the stray cat she could not keep out of her room when she was a teenager. She hated that cat. It jumped on her bed when she was in a middle of a sweet dream and replaced it with nightmares. Aziza threw the coat on the floor with disgust as if it were alive.

“They say as my mother gave birth to me/she taught me how to suckle/At night, by my cradle/she stayed awake to teach sleeping to me/ One word, two words ...”

“*Baseh*! Enough!” Aziza lost her temper with the familiar poetry Shokat had read her many times. “Iranians and their poetry,” she fumed. “Why can’t anyone have an honest discussion?” She saw a familiar package in the trunk. The hard cover of a long book, decorated with scenes of Iran in gold and enamel. She reached in. There were four of them. Aziza withdrew her hand as if touched by fire.

“Why did you bring all these photo albums with you? No wonder the trunk is so heavy.”

“Thought you might want to see some old pictures,” Shokat said with a wide smile.

Aziza noticed her broken front teeth for the first time. “Why can’t you take care of yourself? Look at your teeth.”

“What is the use of children?” Shokat sighed. “I sacrificed myself for you. I gave up so much. I took care of you. Such hardship. And when you could be my cane, the one I could lean against, you picked up and left.”

Aziza searched for the right words, sorry that she had fueled the argument with her comments. How could she communicate with her mother after so many years of silence?

“Did you ever stop to think I had no one? That I needed you? You’re my first. When you were born, everyone turned away their head. Having a girl for a first child was no cause for celebration. But I consoled myself. I had someone to do things with, to go shopping with. I wouldn’t be alone any more.”

“We did go shopping,” the words escaped Aziza’s mouth.

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Aziza remembered going from stall to stall in the crowded bazaar. A merchant with a long white beard and bare feet unrolled nomadic Persian carpets in the colors of the desert, geometric designs in bright orange, red, green. He motioned to them to come in, to take a look. Big burlap sacks of spices, cardamom, cumin, turmeric lined up outside another shop. Bolts of Indian fabric fascinated Aziza. She wondered how the gold and silver threads were spun into the sheer silk fabrics. She felt a deep love for her mother for showing her such a magical world, so different from their gloomy home in the ghetto. It was hot underneath the arched dome. The smell of human sweat mixed with the scent of saffron filled Aziza's nostrils. Aziza was happy to spend the entire day there. Her mother was in no rush to head back home.

As the daylight dimmed, they stepped out of the bazaar. Women, wrapped in their black *chadors*, swarmed the street on their way to the mosque. Men looked at Aziza and her mother with greedy eyes. A young bearded man spat at their feet and shouted at them to cover themselves, putting a burning cigarette on Aziza's bare arm at the same time. Why hadn't her mother advised her to wear something more modest, knowing where they were heading? Aziza had not cried. She was too proud. The muezzin called the worshippers to the evening prayers from atop of the minaret, decorated with blue tiles and Koranic verses. Aziza had always loved the haunting chant.

Realizing she was late for making dinner, her mother decided to take a short cut through a quiet side street. Aziza heard the soft sound of the large wheels on the pavement first, then the sickening low-pitched whistle behind her, then there was pain. The bicyclist grabbed her still-tender breast and pulled as he pedaled away. Aziza moaned. Her mother giggled nervously. The cyclist went around and came back, again, and again.

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Aziza crossed her arms over her chest for protection as she recalled the incident. Why hadn't they taken a taxi home? she thought in anger. What was she thinking? Taking them through isolated streets at dusk? They were lucky she was not raped. Then in a fury, she realized how her mother was pushing her back to her past.

"This is madness," she shouted. "Just madness!" She had to stop it. She had to rebury the memories before they drove her insane.

"Your father doesn't mention your name," Shokat said as if not hearing Aziza. "He doesn't know how he raised you so immoral. You have a heart of stone to have done this to us. Who has ever heard of such a thing? A girl just picking up by herself and leaving? No decent Iranian would marry you now. Who wants a disobedient wife? You are too old now anyway. See what you have done to yourself."

"Look what marriage has done for you. Are you happy?" Aziza lost control of her tongue, the words leaving her mouth louder than she had imagined them; her entire body convulsed.

"Life is not about happiness. It's being with family."

"Life is not about happiness. It's being with family."

"Who is your family, Maman?" Aziza shouted. "Is it Baba, who always puts you down? Who beats you? Who calls you names? Or your in-laws who hate you and have always mistreated you? Or your children who have left you? Or is it your own parents who never called to see if you were alive? Maybe I am better off alone." Aziza was surprised by and hated herself for the cruelty she had inflicted.

"You are not like other people's daughters. You have become like your father's family. What is the use of raising a daughter? I thought I would have someone to *darde-del* with when you grew up. My own daughter to tell of the ache in my heart. The only one who would take care of me."

"There can't be any bread in the kitchen if you forgot to watch over the wheat. Where were you when I was growing up?" Aziza saw the bewilderment in her mother's eyes. She didn't care what Shokat was thinking. It was all too late to demand love.

They sat there silently. Aziza felt like a tired wrestler in a ring, waiting for her opponent to find a different angle of attack. Her heart skipped a beat when, with a loud bang, the electricity went out. The air-conditioner's loud noise died and so did the quiet humming of the refrigerator. Aziza could hear the sound of her own heavy breathing mixed with the creaking of the rocking chair going back and forth, back and forth, the bugs tapping the window.

"What happened?" Her mother jumped out of the chair, standing disoriented, her eyes wide open in panic.

"Nothing, Maman. It's three o'clock in the afternoon. Everyone's air-conditioning must have been on full blast. Now we have a blackout. We had blackouts all the time in Iran. Don't you remember?"

"I didn't think these things happened in America." Shokat sat on the sofa with her daughter.

"Well, maybe not in the rest of America, but this is New Orleans. We often lose our electricity at this time of the day. It just can't keep up with the demand."

The heat and the humidity crept into the room. Aziza's neck was wet. She gathered her long black hair, twisted it and threw it over the pillow. She contemplated taking a shower to get rid of the sticky feeling she hated, but felt weighed down by the memories, too heavy to move off of the sofa.

"*Sharjieh*; it's so humid." Her mother shuffled to open a window. It did not bring relief. The humid, stagnant air swarmed and suspended over the room, smelling like mildew trapped in the grout of an old hot bathroom.

"Sometimes I miss the dry heat. I am not used to this humidity either." Aziza wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her sleeve. "Maman, why don't you go take a shower? It might cool you off a bit."

"It was horrible from the very beginning."

Aziza lifted her body on her arms to look at her mother. Now what?

"That whole thing with your father and uncle having the business together. It was terrible."

"Maman, what are you talking about? That was a long time ago. Why do you always have to go back to the old days?"

"It was your grandmother's fault, you know. She wanted the family to stay together. She was afraid that there wouldn't be anyone to take care of her every single whim. She bared her hair in grief whenever we dared to mention separate homes. Your father loved your grandmother more than all of you."

"Maman, she is dead. Let her stay in her grave. Don't dig her out, please."

"Why did he let us all suffer living with his brother and that whore wife of his?"

"That's the way life was in those days; a lot of people lived with their extended families in the same house."

"And all that hatred, all the hatred. All the fights, brothers drawing blood from each other, punching each other like wild boys, all for the dumb pride, stupid dumb pride."

Aziza squirmed in the corner of the sofa. "*Baseh*, that's enough," she pleaded.

"How many times did I tell your father to find us a little apartment? Nothing fancy. Just a small place of our own. How many times? He wanted the house. He had worked hard to have that house built, he kept saying. He was not going to let his younger brother take it over and defeat him."

"Maman, you are out of Iran now; remember? You are living in the Holy Land, where you always wanted to be. You have your own apartment, living far away from uncle Manouchehr. Let it go."

"Your father still talks about that house. He beats me up. It was my fault, he says, that we left the country in such a rush and left Manouchehr with the house and the business. He wants to go back. He is going to take me, too."

"Baba himself wanted to leave. There was a revolution and mayhem on the streets. He was worried about the kids. With every hoodlum on the street armed after the soldiers fled, he was worried that all of you could get killed." Aziza stared at her mother. "He is not going back. It is too dangerous. Manouchehr can just call the police and let them know where you two have been living the last few years. They'll call you Zionists. That would a death sentence."

Shokat's eyebrows were drawn tightly together; her gaze was fixed on the dark wood-paneled wall, sweat coloring her dress under the armpits. Something about her was scaring Aziza.

"You don't have to go with him. No one can force you."

Aziza felt exhausted. The walls were closing on her. Her breathing was labored as if the oxygen was being sucked out of the room. What if her father went back? What if Shokat stayed behind? Who would take care of her? She resisted giving into a deep melancholy.

"You never take my side. He curses at you too, you know, calls you all different names that his own whore sisters deserve. His mouth opens and filthy words pour out." A surge of nausea almost took over Aziza, but she calmed herself. She slowly lifted herself from the sofa and leaned back against the pillow to keep the acid down. If only she could surrender to a dreamless sleep, if she could seal the past in a heavy box and bury it deep in the ground.

"So, we lived in this big house. Everyone in the community was jealous. But did it bring happiness for any of us? You ran away as soon as you could."

"Maman, I didn't run away. I just came to the States to finish my education."

"And what was wrong with the schools in Iran? You had only one more semester to get your degree. And you had all the suitors any woman could wish for . . . but you chose to be in *ghorbat*, in a foreign country away from home. You just picked up and left the rest of us to suffer with your father and your hateful uncle and his nasty family, may God send them all to the washers of the dead."

"Please don't talk like that, Maman. You are just upsetting yourself. You upset Babatoo when you repeat all these stories. Forget the past. Let the past die. Bury it. You are living away from them now. Be happy."

"Your father says that you could have brought us here from the beginning, then he could have gone back to sell everything and the house and the business would have not been lost to Manouchehr. Now he has lost everything he ever worked for. The other children followed your example, each one living in a different part of the world. So your father wants to go back. There is no one around to take care of us in our old age. Poor. Away from home."

Aziza opened her mouth to say she was not a citizen then. She could not have brought anyone over from Iran. The Americans were being kept hostage over there. In such terrible times, no one in the government had sympathy for them. She was having a hard time herself, coping in a hostile country to Iranians. The only country that took them in was Israel, and that was not her fault. But she closed her mouth. She had said it too many times. Both her parents knew she had tried in vain to bring them over. There was nothing else to say. Then a sudden realization hit her. Did Shokat know about her recent citizenship? She could bring them over now. No. Her mind refused to accept the possibility.

A huge bang startled her. Even though she knew thunderstorms occurred every afternoon after the humidity had reached its peak, she still jumped out of her skin when the lightning struck so close. The foundation of the building shook, the way their house in Iran used to sway in the frequent earthquakes. She thought her mother looked pale.

"Maman, I'm sorry. I should've warned you about the storm. I don't know why the thunder is so loud here."

Large drops of rain hit the neighbors' roofs and the side of the apartment building, entering through the window, splashing Shokat's back.

"Maman, close the window, you're getting soaked. This is going to be a big storm." When her mother didn't move, Aziza went to the window and shut it, getting wet herself. "I definitely need to take a shower now," she said, yearning to be alone for a few minutes.

"All that hate, all the hate."

Aziza turned around and looked at her mother. Why wouldn't her mother let go of the past? Aziza had buried it all. Why did Shokat dig out what needed to be forgotten? Was there a potion to induce amnesia?

"Why did they have to do that? What was my fault? The two brothers fought over a piece of property and forgot everyone else around them."

"Maman, stop it!" Aziza scolded, her head throbbing. She wished she had a real mother, like everyone else, not the mentally sick one in front of her.

She wished, in her own horror, that her mother would die before she could put Aziza in the box filled with the memories, before she would be sentenced to sleep with them forever.

"They had an argument and your father had to go watch Manouchehr's wife in the shower to avenge him. Didn't he think that Manouchehr would do the same? The two men fought and Manouchehr found a way to open the bathroom door to watch my naked body. What was my sin to be so humiliated? I didn't want to stay in that house. Why did he punish me, disgrace me?"

*

Aziza's last summer in Iran was the hottest. The pavement radiated heat through her shoes as she ran out of the university campus to catch the bus home. The pollution was trapped between the mountains surrounding the city and hung over it as a cloud of smog and filth. Her white blouse, just washed and ironed the day before, was gray. She spread her long hair around her shoulders despite the heat, trying to hide the black ring around her collar that she instinctively knew was there. The bus made a sudden stop to leave her on the side of the street. It sped away, drowning her in its exhaust fumes. Two taxis swerved to avoid the bus, the drivers' heads out of their windows cussing, spitting at her.

Aziza kept her kept her head down as she turned into the side street, taking small steps towards her house. Nice girls keep to themselves; they don't answer back, don't make eye contact, don't walk fast. She didn't want the neighbors' eyes looking at her disapprovingly. She feared her father might be watching from a window and scold her for her immodest manners if she took big steps, if she ran. Exhausted from the heat and the end of semester exams, she didn't have the energy to challenge her father's authority.

A donkey, loaded on both sides with small round watermelons, passed by on the sidewalk, almost bumping into her. Its feet left deep imprints in the soft asphalt. Hitting the back side of the animal with a stick, a sweaty farmer in his loose pants and long tunic screamed in her ears.

"*Hendooneh*, watermelons, eat and cool yourself, *ay hendooneh*, two *rials* a piece, ripe watermelons." As he passed by, smiling, his dirty hands quickly reached for her and pinched her hard on the butt. "*Hendooneh,* ripe, delicious watermelons."

Aziza pulled away in pain, feeling dirty and quickened her pace.

The heat radiated from the metal door of her house as she rang and waited. Someone finally unlocked the door after looking through the peep hole. The unfriendly door burned her fingers as she turned the metal knob and entered. *Why can't I have a key to my own house?* In the walled courtyard, once filled with neat rows of roses, the flowers drooped over untrimmed and thirsty, covered with weeds. They produced stunted little flowers with little fragrance.

Passing by the clothesline, Aziza plucked a pair of panties and a bra, a short-sleeved blue shirt and a navy skirt. This was her favorite time, jumping in the shower before going back to school for her afternoon exam. She opened the door to the hallway, walked to the kitchen and stuck her head in to tell her mother she was taking a shower before lunch. Shokat looked at her but said nothing, going back to aggressively washing the romaine lettuce for lunch. Aziza said *salam* to Manouchehr's wife, cutting watermelon and angrily throwing its pieces in a large bowl.

Something happened here today, Aziza thought. She didn't want to know what. That was one of the good things about the summer. She didn't have to wait for the water heater to have a hot shower. The cold water was refreshing. She had just enough time to shower, eat quickly and leave. She would stay at the library late. Exams were always a good excuse. She could share a taxi on the way back with a few friends. By the time she got home, she hoped, everyone would be too sleepy for arguments.

Aziza passed her uncle Manouchehr in the hallway. "*Salam*!" There was no reply. She said *salam* to her grandmother sitting cross-legged on the Persian carpet in the hallway smoking her waterpipe and quickly went through the bathroom doors before the old woman could ask her to run an errand for her, as she always did.

They were fortunate to have a small bathroom at home. Most people she knew had to go to public baths once a week or just warm up water in a pot outside to rinse. She hung up her clean clothes on a nail in the wall of the tiny dressing room. The light bulb had burned out yet again, and no one had bothered to replace it. The dressing room smelled like stale blood. The small storage space underneath the bench was reserved for women's sanitary needs. They were letting their dirty clothes sit there and rot, a war of attrition. Should she waste her day off on Friday to clean up? Aziza took her sweaty clothes off and threw them on the bench. She would wash them before going back to school the following day.

She always felt a bit uncomfortable in the dressing room. The wooden door opened into the hallway, but it had no locks. If it were shut, no one would intrude. She opened the metal door to the shower, stepped in and closed the latch. The rays of the sun came faintly through the red plastic curtain and gave the room a pinkish hue that Aziza loved. She always relaxed as soon she stepped under the cold shower. Its powerful spray washed away the dirt and grime of the street, the curse of the drivers, the touch of strangers. Afterwards she would feel renewed, alive.

Aziza had her eyes closed, soap bubbles in her long hair and on her face, when she sensed the draft. Maybe she would have reacted faster if she didn't have to wash the soap off her eyes. How many times do I tell the boys not to play hide and seek in the dressing room when I am taking a shower, she thought. My little brothers are in trouble today. They can't expect me to take them to the movies if they bother me like this. The draft grew stronger. She opened her eyes, looking through a film of soap. There was a shadow at the door. Was it her mother wanting her to hurry up for lunch? It was a man's frame at the door. She felt a shiver go through her body. Had she left the door ajar? The water was hitting her hard on the head. She couldn't move fast. There was a long tunnel between her and the door.

She walked toward the opening in slow motion. Manouchehr's eyes followed the flow of the water on her body. The water stabbed her as it dripped from her head onto her face; it didn't cool off the burning on her cheeks, her nose, her lips. It slid from her long hair to her neck and shoulders, down her arms. It split on her pounding chest, passed the tan line and went around her breasts and over her nipples. It stung her as it dripped down to her belly button, divided in an upside-down V and lingered for a while. It rolled down her hips, her thighs with its hair standing up straight, crossed over her shaved-line, over her knees, down her smooth legs. She finally reached the opening and faced her smiling uncle. She closed the door and leaned against it, her face wet and salty. The water gathered at her feet in a warm puddle, full of shame.

*

Aziza had not experienced this flashback since she had moved to the States. She had never told anyone about it. Trying to lose the memory, she had filed it away as a nightmare, as a sequence of a bad movie she had left before the end of the show. Now it was back like a forgotten dead body thrown in the swamps without proper burial, without a casket, without crying, without mourning. It had resurfaced bloated, massive, its deadly stench overpowering all other senses, demanding recognition.

She remembered how she had wanted to die rather than face her uncle every day at breakfast, lunch, dinner. The gleam in his eyes with every brief eye contact, the almost discernible grin, barely formed in the corner of his lips, the slight touch of skin as she passed him the teacup. Every day on the way to school she had thought of throwing herself in front of the bus. She had scavenged everyone's pill boxes trying to concoct a deadly potion. The butcher knife in the kitchen started to look friendly; its sharp blade promised comfort on her wrist.

She went for her last excursion to the mountains with her classmates to say a silent goodbye. Her plans had become detailed, real, ready to be executed. She had sat on a rock, watching the snow-capped mountains, a cool breeze blowing on her face, when she realized the insanity that had overtaken her. It was time to put a great distance between herself and her family, time to choose life.

Aziza had immigrated to the States to find peace, to be alone. She hated the new Islamic government not for the reasons many others did, but because the revolution had eliminated the distance between her and so many family members, who had left Iran in fear, who lived closer to her now. Her uncle, who had never left the boundaries of their city before the revolution, had discovered the freedom of modern technology. Using her father's resources left behind, he flew to every family gathering in the U.S., isolating Aziza, enclosing her further in her southern enclave.

The resurrection of the dark ghosts by her mother now imported malignity to her last refuge. Aziza felt closed in, cornered. She was filled with rage and panic. Her hands closed in tight fists. A deep secret wish rose in her heart, the need to stand up and pound on her mother for not protecting her, for being a useless blob of flesh, for just being. She stared at Shokat with bloodshot eyes, ready to pounce on her like a wild animal.

Shokat didn't look at Aziza. She was folded in a fetal position, her feet on the sofa, her hands tightly hugging them, her head resting on her knees. Aziza thought that she looked like a jug of wine, like the ones in the book of Omar Khayam's *Rubaiyat*, but this jug was cracked, soon ready to spill its precious contents.

The air-conditioner came to life with a loud click. Shokat didn't move.

The cool air blew on Aziza's face and gave her a chill. Something was stinging her face. She unlocked her fists, touched her cheeks, and was surprised by her own tears. She was mad at herself. She had vowed that she would never cry; she would never let anyone see her hurt, her vulnerability.

Shokat rocked herself, muttering incoherent words.

Aziza forced herself to reach over and touch her mother's hands. They were cold. Her eyes looked distant—filled with fear, like a child's who had just awoken from a nightmare.

"I wasn't a good mother to you," her voice cracked.

Aziza moved closer to her and caressed her mother's matted hair.

"I am scared. I don't want to go back to that house." Shokat wrapped her hands around Aziza's waist. Aziza had thought she could never recognize love. She was surprised that its sensation didn't need the pronunciation of the actual word. She held her mother tight. Shokat put her head on Aziza's chest and cried, trying to speak words that were lost in the sound of her sobbing.

"Shh!" Aziza held her tightly and stroked her back. "I know, Maman, I know." She whispered in her mother's ears softly until Shokat fell asleep. Aziza lay her down gently on the sofa and covered her with a blanket. She knelt beside the sofa, put her head next to her mother's, and kissed her forehead, feeling as if it were the very first time she had really touched her.

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Farideh Goldin was born in 1953 in Shiraz, Iran, to a family of dayanim, judges and leaders of the Jewish community. Her family moved out of the *mahaleh*, the Jewish ghetto, to a Moslem neighborhood when she was eight years old. Later, attending an American-style university in Iran, she was torn between her loyalty to her family, who obeyed strict social, cultural and religious mores, and her western education that promoted individualism and self-reliance. In *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman,* Farideh reveals her struggle in balancing her two worlds. In her second memoir, *Burying Yehetzkel,* she chronicles her life as a new immigrant to the United States. Farideh teaches literature and is the Director of the Institute for Jewish Studies and Interfaith Understanding at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia. Her website is www.FaridehGoldin.com.

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