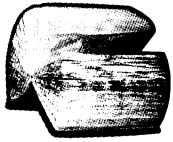


A Bride for My Father

by Farideh Dayanim Goldin

My uncle Jamshid was jubilant at the Bat Mitzvah of his granddaughter, Rachel. He had finally succeeded in leaving Iran and its stifling laws the previous year. Now in America, if a lock of hair protruded from the corner of his wife's *chador*,¹ he did not need to fear a member of the Islamic *komite*² humiliating and threatening her with public lashing. Now, he no longer had to try to be invisible to escape the retributions for being a Jew. He could exhibit his religion openly and proudly. He carried himself tall and confident, hands locked behind his back like a British royal, greeting the guests with the nod of his head and genteel *taarofing*.³

He was filled with joy to be with his children, most of whom had escaped Iran through dangerous routes many years before. Above all, he was proud of his granddaughter. Rachel had just turned thirteen and her big birthday cake was there for everyone to admire. She looked beautiful in her long white dress and her high heels, no doubt her first time in them. She stumbled once in a while, then quickly composed herself, trying to act grown up. Yet I noticed her watching her friends running around and having fun even while she greeted the guests with well-coached, polite phrases.



The guests were family members and close friends. Since our big family was scattered all around the country, only a handful who lived close enough to drive had made the trip. The party was casual. Paper plates and colorful balloons were set up beautifully. The food was all home-made by the parents, grandparents, aunts, and friends, so plainly a labor of love. The aroma of Persian food filled the small reception room. I could have closed my eyes to reverse the clock to a time long ago when my large extended family used to gather at my parents' home for holidays before the turmoil in Iran scattered us around the world.

Every so often, one of my siblings approached me to ask if I had tried the *reshte*; it had red beans instead of lentils. Had I tried the chicken kabob; it had been marinated in lime juice! We were hungry for more than food. I missed being in a group of all Iranians, the gentle hum of my own language enveloping me and the familiar food prepared slightly differently. I knew my siblings felt the loss as well.

This was a kind of going home for my siblings and me. We had tried very hard to forget our country of birth and to immerse ourselves in the American culture. We had chosen American spouses whose families we had adopted. Or had they adopted us? Our cups were being filled with a sense of identity and belonging by being in an Iranian atmosphere among family members we had not seen in many years.

Jamshid came closer to welcome my three daughters and me to the family affair. "Beautiful girls," he exclaimed, "*arouseshoon bekonmid*, may you make them brides!" I thanked him, proud of my daughters. "Everything in its time!" I tried to speak politely, afraid that I might insult him by indirectly contradicting his good wishes. I had been away from the culture for too long. It is not enough to just know the language. I was afraid I had lost my mastery over the whole custom of *taarof*, of niceties, the art of being indirect and polite. At the same time, I regretted not having taught my children the language so

that they could understand and enjoy more fully the subtle ways of the culture.

Jamshid looked at me and winked. He stretched his right arm, made a half circle, pointing to my siblings. Then with much pride he turned to me and said: "*Midoonid*,⁴ you know that if it had not been for me none of you would have been here!"

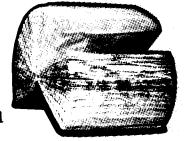
"Yes?" I swallowed a piece of *gondi*, trying to savor the aroma of roasted chick peas, meat and turmeric. "How is that?" I pretended I didn't know what he was talking about, partly to be polite by allowing him to have the power of knowledge over me since he was older and deserved the respect. "Well, *behetoon migam ta bedoonid*, I tell you so you will know."

He used a plural 'you' when addressing me as a sign of respect and also a certain formality that had always existed between us. My aunt would have addressed me in the singular since we had a closer relationship and were of the same gender.

Jamshid continued, "*Midoonid*, you know, I was the one who found a bride for your father, Razi Khanom, *midoonid*?" No, I pretended ignorance, knowing that he had a story for me which I had never heard from his perspective.

My mother had retold the event like a broken record during the years I had lived at home. My siblings and I had to resist the urge to slap her out of it and force her to look toward the future. Had she been afraid that we might forget the story? Finally she gave up retelling the story when we started to cover our ears and run out of the room. I had heard her mumbling to herself when I was in my twenties. She became quiet when I was in my thirties. My mother's side of the story was burned in my mind with fiery words that resisted healing. The wound had become more stubborn and painful since I had married and become a mother of daughters myself.

Namidoonam,⁵ I don't know, I lied again, knowing that he needed to tell the story and that I had to allow him out of respect, and in a strange way I needed to hear it as well. I was hoping for a story that differed from the one I knew. I needed



it to be happy and soothing. “Please tell me,” I said with reverence.

His wife, my aunt Heshmat, who was my father’s sister, came closer, joining us. She was short, maybe five feet tall. Every lock of her hair was carefully hidden under a *shytel*, a wig, imitating the Ashkenazi mode of female modesty. She looked unnatural to me with the wig, but I knew she had to conform to these standards to be able to live in her neighborhood, where people had been welcoming and friendly. She looked radiant any way. At age sixty-seven, her skin without make-up was soft, clear, and without wrinkles. She had a smile not only on her lips but in her eyes, showing her deep happiness and contentment with life as it was.

“*Darim rage beh khastegari mamaneshoon sohbat mikoornim*, we are talking about how we came about asking for her mother’s hand in marriage to her father,” Jamshid explained to his wife, his Shirazi accent evident. Then, he turned to me and continued with his story, stringing the words together slowly and without a pause. “We went to Tehran with the name of a girl someone had given us, looking for a bride for your father—we went to the Jewish ghetto—we asked where this girl’s family lived—someone sent us from this *koocheh* to that *koocheh*, from this alleyway to the other—we were strangers—we didn’t know anyone.” He put emphasis on the first syllable of each word in the fashion of a story teller trying to make the story juicier, saying every word so slowly, as though he was tasting it before letting it leave his mouth.

“*Belakhareh*,⁶ eventually,” he sighed, “we found the place and we knocked at the door—and these people came out asking who we were—we were scared—we were strangers and didn’t know anybody—we told them who we were and showed them our references.”

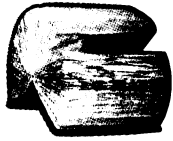
He paused, “*Midoonid*, those days people—Jewish people—were afraid. After all we were two men in the *mahaleh*⁷ and nobody knew us. We just had a piece of paper from someone who knew someone else in the ghetto. *Belakhareh!*” he

stopped to catch his breath and wet his lips, “we went in and they sat us down—mother, grandmother, father, brother—we didn’t know who these people were!

Baleh, yes, they sat us down and they brought us *chay*⁸ with sugar cubes and they brought us fruit and they brought us *agil*,⁹ and they insisted that we should relax and feel at home. *Dar har hal*,” he said with a tone of resignation, “anyhow, we sat there cross-legged with our shoes off and we ate and we drank and we had not seen the girl yet—we didn’t know how to ask politely to see the girl—we were guests and we were indebted to them for the food we had eaten and we didn’t want them to think we had no manners and that we were arrogant.” He continued with his long monologue as though it was all but one sentence. “Final—ly, with much apologies, *we* asked if your father could meet the girl.”

OK! I thought, my Farsi is not as good as I thought. Is he using the plural—*ma*¹⁰—not just for me, but for himself as well, the Royal “we,” to set his position higher? Or does his *ma* include my father as well? The ambiguities of Farsi! Nothing is ever what you think! What was my father doing then if Jamshid was the director of this drama? How old was my father? Twenty? Maybe he did not talk; maybe he allowed his sister’s husband to be in charge out of respect for his seniority. That would make sense culturally.

“*Khanom*,¹¹ lady,” he addressed me respectfully, “you would not believe what happened next.” His eyes gleamed with the excitement of the story he was bringing to life for me, as the guests ate and drank around us. “*Khanom*, lady, *yek dafeh*, all of a sudden, ‘we’ hear the sound of women ululating and singing wedding songs! Someone said, ‘Show the Rabbi here, move out of the way, the *mula*¹² is here’—and there were crowds of people from everywhere—there was going to be a wedding! ‘we’ thought—and ‘we’ looked at your father and said, ‘we don’t know this woman and they are planning to stick her to you sight unseen. We better get out of here in a hurry or otherwise you will be



married soon!"

Jamshid stopped for a minute shaking his head to show the distress this event was causing him even now. "*Baleh*,"¹³ he slapped the top of one hand with the other to show his feeling of helplessness, "we put our tails on our backs—we, each one, had two feet but we had to find another two to borrow to run faster—and we ran as though it was for our lives and didn't stop until we were outside the *mahaleh*—and now we didn't know what to do—*koja berim, chekar bekonim?* where to go, what to do, 'we' asked—we were Jews and couldn't stay anywhere but the *mahaleh*—and now we were afraid to be in the *mahaleh!* *Koja berim, chekar bekonim?* Where could we go, what could we do?"

He became pensive for a while. "Midoonid, 'we' were responsible for your father! *Belakhareh*, after all, your grandmother had given 'us' the responsibility of taking care of him and finding him a wife. He had just lost his father a few years before—he was the oldest son—he was alone and he had to take care of his mother and siblings but there was no one to watch over him. *Chekar bekonim, koja berim!* 'We' said let's go to Hamedoon for a *ziarat*,¹⁴ for a religious pilgrimage to the tombs of Esther and Mordekhai—we would come back when things cooled off—when people were not so angry. So we took the bus and headed for the mountains."

The games fate plays, I thought! They were not originally heading for Hamedan!¹⁵ I had always assumed that my mother's town was their original destination. Did I want to hear this story? I was being dragged to a past that I had buried deep in my memories. I would have liked to tell him to stop but at the same time I was impatient to be taken back in time.

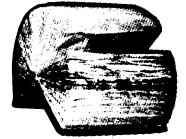
"*Vaghti to Hamedoon boodim*, when we came to be in Hamedan,"¹⁶ he stretched the words with his Judi¹⁷ accent, "'we' said let's go see where the girls are here. People say Hamedooni¹⁸ girls are beautiful. *Belakhareh*, we went to the

Jewish ghetto and asked where the girls were—and someone said that they were in the synagogue learning their Hebrew and prayers. 'We' said let's go there and watch," and he looked at me from the corner of his eyes, getting ready for the juicy part of the story: "we waited until the girls came out of the building—and 'we' saw this girl who was fair-skinned (a very desirable trait) and had dark curly hair to her waist and 'we' told your father that she was a good match for him."

He made a long pause. He asked me if I knew the story of Abraham in the Torah, and how he had sent his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant had seen Rebecca by the well and knew she was "the one." Jewish commentators have suggested that the young woman disobeyed her parents' wishes for the privilege of marrying Isaac, whom she had never met, who lived in a far away land. Yes, I knew that story just too well. My uncle was using the story to convey the religious significance of what he had done—bringing two people together and, in doing so, creating the five children, my siblings and me.

I understood him clearly. I had read the same text and found similarities between the two young brides, the Biblical Rebecca and my mother Razi, who had married strangers and had left home to live in unfamiliar lands among unknown people. I could not imagine the bat-mitzvah girl, Rachel, now at their age capable of doing the same without going mad. I could not conceive of my uncle repeating the same match-making concept for his dancing granddaughter.

"What happened then?" I asked, eager to hear this most important part of the event from his angle. "*Belakhareh*," he continued, "we went and found her house—we went and bought some flowers—we went to the house and knocked at the door. Your grandmother opened the door and asked who we were and what we wanted. 'We' said we had come to ask for her daughter's hand for your father—and she wouldn't let us in the house—and she said she didn't know if we were mur-



derers or not—and we had to calm her down and tell her that your father's half-brother, Rahim Khan, had married a girl from Hamedoon—and 'we' gave her their names and asked her to talk to the family, and said that we would come back the day after," he paused again to catch his breath and to bow to a few family members in the reception room and to exchange compliments.

I was thankful for the break in order to compose myself. I looked for something to drink to soothe my dry throat but I was afraid that my shaking hands would give my emotions away. I locked them in front of me and waited for him politely as I scanned the room. There was Rachel again. I had to smile. The high heels were off. She had found her friends and they were giggling as they held hands and danced to a Jewish song. Her hair had been pulled up in a French twist and sprayed heavily. The way she was jumping around with the other girls was going to unravel her hair soon. Her world was the one I preferred to watch rather than being reminded of the world of a young girl years ago into which I was being dragged mercilessly.

Jamshid turned back to me, apologized, and continued with his story, "We went back the next day and your grandmother invited us in. We were offered *chay* and *sharbat*¹⁹ and *agil*. We sat and we ate and exchanged niceties. Your mother's uncle Dr. Sa'id, a dentist, was there—and he asked questions. They said that we should wait a year and 'we' said that it was impossible. The distance was great and we had come for a bride now. Moreover, the month of Tammuz was just a week away and it was forbidden to have any celebrations in the days between the seventeenth of Tammuz and the ninth of Av." He stopped to explain the significance of the date to me and although I knew, I let him tell me. "Midoonid, these are the days leading to the destruction of the Second Temple and many more disasters for the Jews," he explained to me. Then he continued with the story, "Dr. Sa'id said, '*Bracha begid*, let's say the

bracha, let us say the proper prayers.' "

Namidoonam, I don't know what happened. I was too young. It was all such a long time ago. *Namidoonam!*

I came home and there were these strangers there with my uncle.

Namidoonam! He said "*Bracha begid, bracha begid*," but I didn't know what that meant. I didn't expect a total destruction of my life. I was too innocent.

Namidoonam! It was my fate!

Namidoonam! I don't know!

"'We' put your father in the care of his stepbrother's family—and 'we' took the first bus to Shiraz," he slapped one hand over the other again, "*namidoonid, namidoonid*, you don't know, what difficulties 'we' went through—the bus overturned outside the gate of the city and people were hurt! *Namidoonid*, you just don't know, what I went through! *Belakhareh*, finally," he stretched the tale like a good Iranian storyteller, "'we' went to Mashalah, your father's oldest half-brother who was in charge of writing Jewish wedding contracts—put him on the bus with 'us' and 'we' went back to Hamedoon—there was no time to waste!"

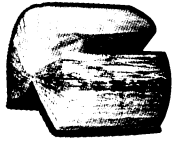
"By the time we arrived, your father had bought something made of gold and something made of silver and had already delivered it to your grandmother's house. 'We' had taken a piece of this fabric and that fabric from Shiraz for a gift—there was not much time to go shopping—we went to their house—had *chay*—there was a small reception and some family members came for dessert and tea and we said the *bracha* and took the bride home!"

I threw myself on the floor and begged my mother, "*Maman*,²⁰ *Maman*, please don't send me away, please, please."

I kissed her feet; I told her that I would be her maid; "Please don't send me away. I will stay home and clean; I will take care of my brothers; I am your only daughter; I will be your servant. Please don't let them take me."

She peeled me off and turned her back.

Namidoonam! Namidoonam, I don't know, why was this my fate? I don't



know why my life had to be destroyed like that.

There was no wedding gown for me. There was no party. There were only a few men who mumbled some words and changed my life forever.

Namidoonam, I don't know! It was my fate.

Where had my mother's father been when her mother gave her away? I had seen him only once as an old man, shortly after my grandparents had moved to Tehran. They had moved to escape the unbearable poverty and anti-Semitism in Hamedan. A few years later they would make *aliya* to Israel for the same reasons.

They did not know then that poverty would follow them to the end of their lives and the prejudice that was anti-Semitism in Iran would only change shape when they would be stepped on as *Mizrahim*, as Eastern Jews, in the promised land.

My grandfather was a Rabbi, a learned-man. He had given up a lucrative job after his first wife died and had taken refuge in praying. During the week that I was in Tehran, he had sat quietly in a corner praying and studying Jewish texts. When he left the house, I was told, he went to the Jewish ghetto to see if he could earn a few *rials*²¹ by praying for others. There were no hugs and kisses. Maybe he had tried and I had refused, being in awe of the holy aura around him, or maybe it was the rough stubble that he kept in a show of religious humility. I left him alone in his little corner and he was detached from me, too.

There had not been any hugs and kisses from my grandmother either. She carried the financial burden of a large family along with the duties of mothering six sons. Three of them were born after my mother was sent away. One was a few

years older than me, one was my age, and the last one was four years younger. My youngest uncles and I struck up a friendship right away. My grandmother came home late in the afternoons from her job as a cook. She was like an ox ready to plow a field. Screaming and cussing in her thick Hamedani accent, she would storm through the house, hitting the back of the boys' heads with her large scruffy hand if they disobeyed her. We did not admit our fear in front of each other. As soon as she left the room, we would burst into laughter until we were crying; we laughed until

I peed in my pants. Looking back, I remember how I had preferred my grandfather's silence and his small old frame to my grandmother's rages and her robust, tall figure.

What was my grandfather doing when my grandmother gave their daughter away? Was he sitting quietly in the corner praying?

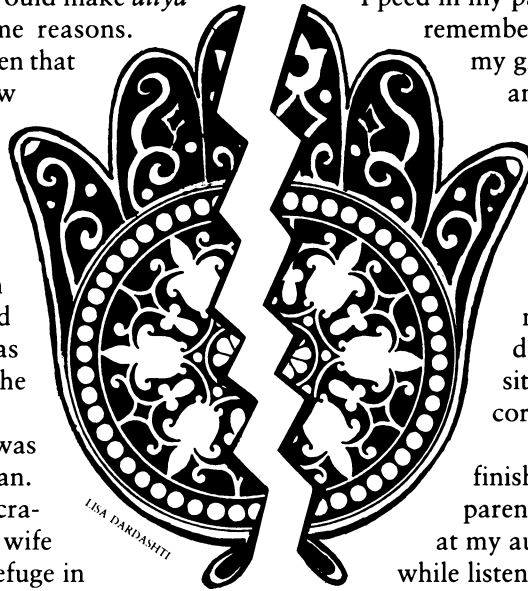
As Uncle Jamshid finished the tale of my parents' marriage, I looked at my aunt Heshmat, beaming while listening to the story.

"*Ameh joon*, dear aunt, do you remember when my mother was brought to Shiraz?"

"Of course I remember, are you joking? I had just had my second child, Ziba. Farhad was only two years old. I took him and the baby. The family took green²² cloth to throw over them for good luck and met them at the bus stop. We sang them *vasoonak*,²³ wedding songs, and threw *nogh*!²⁴ at them."

"Were there any celebrations at home?" I wanted to know.

"They came back before the seventeenth of Tammuz when celebrations are forbidden as a reminder of the destruction of the Temple. *Midooni*,²⁵ you know, the tradition says that only bad things happen during this time and one has to be very





careful!”

“*Baleh*,” I agreed, “ So, you *do* remember my mother as a young bride!”

“*Baleh*, yes,” she said with much emphasis. Then, she put her lips to my ears and whispered, “ *midooni*, do you know, your mother had not had her period yet? She was only thirteen!”

“*Midoonam*,” I said, swallowing the lump in the back of my throat, “I know!”

I wrote to my uncle. I told him that he was responsible for putting me in this hell-hole and that he needed to come and take me out of it as he had put me in it with his own hands; for acting as my father when I already had a father. Why had he not asked my father?

“Please come and take me away or I will die in this foreign land.” *I wrote my mother and begged her to get me out. “I am miserable here. Come and take me and I will be a servant for you. Why have you sent me to such a faraway land? I don’t have anyone to cry to; I don’t have anyone to protect me. Please come and take me home or I will die.”*

But no response came to these letters or the ones after. Namidoonam! Namidoonam, I don’t know, why fate played such a cruel game with me.

Then one day—much later—came a letter telling me that that was my home and that I didn’t have any other home. So I submitted to my fate. What else could have I done? Namidoonam! Namidoonam! I don’t know!

I often wonder what the biblical Rebecca would have said if she had had a voice. What if she could have told her own story?

Notes

- ¹ A women’s full body covering required by Islamic laws of modesty.
- ² committee.
- ³ the Iranian custom of exchanging niceties.
- ⁴ you know, plural.
- ⁵ I don’t know.
- ⁶ afterall, a mode of speech in Farsi.
- ⁷ Jewish ghetto.
- ⁸ tea.
- ⁹ a mixture of nuts and seeds.
- ¹⁰ we.
- ¹¹ lady, Mrs.
- ¹² a religious leader, in this case a Rabbi.
- ¹³ yes.
- ¹⁴ a religious pilgrimage.
- ¹⁵ a city in Iran, a summer retreat of Achamid kings.
- ¹⁶ People from the city of Shiraz replace “a” with an “o” in their speech.
- ¹⁷ a Judeo-Persian language spoken by the Jews of Shiraz.
- ¹⁸ from Hamedan.
- ¹⁹ a cold drink made with the essence of various fruits and flowers.
- ²⁰ mother.
- ²¹ Iranian money.
- ²² green, the color of greenery, symbolizes life and happiness.
- ²³ Vassonak is a collection of Jewish wedding poems, sung by Shirazi women at happy occasions.
- ²⁴ an aromatic candy made with flour, sugar, almonds and rose water.
- ²⁵ you know, singular.