

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 42
Issue 1 *Spring 2012*

Article 34

Spring 2012

Other Mothers, Other Sons

Mehdi Tavana Okasi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Okasi, Mehdi Tavana. "Other Mothers, Other Sons." *The Iowa Review* 42.1 (2012): 130-146. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7135>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

OTHER MOTHERS, OTHER SONS

My mother feared dying young and orphaning me in a strange country where I had no blood relatives. “What would you do if I died, Omid?” she asked throughout my childhood. I knew to say that I would die, too; like a petal to her stalk, I would wilt and fall away. Hearing my answer gave her strength to endure the many humiliations, the endless sacrifices. She asked me to beseech God to give her a long life and financial freedom. Each night before bed, she dictated my prayers until the words flowed freely and I could no longer fall asleep without uttering them. Health. Prosperity. Longevity. “God always listens to children,” she would say, “because they are pure and clean.” I was an obedient child, had no one but her, and was defined by the prospect of what I could lose, not by what I could gain. “No one will ever love you like I do,” went her constant reminder. “But you’ll only know this after I’m buried and gone.”

130 I was eight years old in the fall of 1984. My mother and I had been in the United States fewer than two months, desperate to find other exiles who, like us, had escaped the newly founded Islamic Republic. We got out in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war, leaving behind my father who was killed when a bomb fell on our house. My mother says I slept right through it, so I never saw my father get us out, or rush back inside for the contents of our safe, never saw him buried under the rubble. When I confessed that I couldn’t remember that night, my mother told me that memory was shared like blood, that once in a while, we had to depend on each other for it. I didn’t question the details of my father’s death or of our escape. These bits of history that she dropped into my mouth nourished me, and whenever people asked about my father, or our home in Iran, I would regurgitate them without the slightest hesitation. With me in tow, she set about finding other Iranians to populate our new lives in America, and that’s how we came to know Dari and his family. We met by chance but fostered a friendship out of our shared loneliness. In those days, in Watertown, Massachusetts, much of what we did was out of loneliness.

Unlike my mother and me, Dari’s parents immigrated before the Revolution, and Dari was born in the States, a fact that he announced as if it were a prized comic book still sealed in its plastic casing. Though he

was six years older than me, our mothers insisted that we become friends. Eventually, I was taught to call Dari's mother, Ghaleh Maryam, and his father, Amoo Essi, "aunt" and "uncle," though we weren't related by blood. In Iran, there would have been little occasion for their friendship. Dari's mother had lived in Zanjan, a small village with dirt roads and few telephones, while my mother had lived in Tehran, on a government complex where my father was boss. She taught secondary school, having completed her master's in history, even though we didn't need the income. Dari's mother, on the other hand, had but a high school diploma and subsisted on the money her husband sent from America. In those days, my mother likes to say, we were bound by the same soil, and because of the regime, forced thousands of miles from Iran. That was enough reason to stick together. It was a time when tradition mattered, when Iranians still cared for hospitality and threw grand parties, trying to preserve the ways of their own parents on strange and lonely shores.

Some time after our mothers became friends, mine confessed to Dari's that she knew, even before Ghaleh Maryam uttered a word, that she was from Iran. I remember distinctly that Saturday morning all those years ago standing at the mouth of Dari's family's driveway, having followed a series of yellow signs advertising a yard sale. My mother pointed Ghaleh Maryam out almost immediately, her voice suddenly alert. Even I found something recognizable about her, although I wouldn't have been able to verbalize it then. Her dark saucer eyes, the deep sheen of her waist-length hair, her cashew complexion, her sturdy hips. But it was the way she moved between people; the loud way she praised her own wares, her voice poised to haggle, which reassured my mother she was from Iran.

We moved between the folding tables lined along the driveway piled with kitchen appliances and stacks of dishes. My mother picked up an ivory platter ideal for serving rice. Our apartment on the first floor of a three-story house was only blocks away from Dari's and belonged to the Unitarian Church of Arlington Street, our American sponsors. We had some essentials, but my mother longed to make the apartment feel like ours and had begun to purchase the forsaken belongings of others to fill up our own lives. We still did not own a car and depended on public transportation. "Only used twice," Ghaleh Maryam said, approaching my mother slowly. "Very, very beautiful. You buy, you love it." My mother turned the serving dish in her hands.

"How much?" she asked, even though the price, eight dollars, was clearly marked with a yellow sticker. Recognition flashed across Ghaleh Maryam's

face; she stared at my mother and then at me, as if trying to place us. In Iran, my mother was never required to haggle for anything, leaving the shopping to the staff of ten that maintained our estate.

“You are Iranian,” Ghaleh Maryam said. From her manner of speech, my mother later told me in private, she could tell Ghaleh Maryam came from a modest background. Her voice sounded nasal, as though she’d been raised among goats.

“This is Omid.” My mother turned me in her direction. Looking down, Ghaleh Maryam asked my age in Farsi. She had a son—Dari—she said, who was close in years. Where was he, she wondered aloud, looking up and down the street. It would be so nice for me to meet him, my mother spoke up on my behalf, given that I was new to the neighborhood and had no friends. I needed to come out of my shell. I was too much the timid child.

They became instant friends that day standing in Ghaleh Maryam’s driveway, ignoring the people who browsed around them and occasionally interrupted their talk to pay, Ghaleh Maryam making change from a pink fanny pack around her waist. Mostly, my mother was relieved to have found another Iranian so soon, and so close to our new home. It was a good omen. Ghaleh Maryam said she too was superstitious, and once a fortune-teller had lived under her roof. My mother added that since we’d left Vienna, where we had waited for asylum from the United States, she hadn’t heard a single syllable of Farsi.

In Vienna, we had lived with other Iranian refugees for three months, seeking solace from the uncertainty of our futures by cooking together, navigating the white, ornamental city in numbers. “It was very difficult for me,” my mother told Ghaleh Maryam. “The cramped apartments, the long lines, no one to give you an answer. The coldness of the Austrian people.” But, my mother continued, we were among fellow countrymen, which was a tremendous comfort. My mother believed that one Iranian would never harm another—at least while abroad—as if nostalgia for their shared homeland would curb the vices of human nature. Of course she was mistaken.

When Dari rode up on his bicycle, Ghaleh Maryam called him over, introducing us with much fanfare. Dari, she told me, was an avid explorer and knew the neighborhood like the back of his hand. There was a park only a few blocks away, a favorite convenience store that sold slushies. Handing Dari a few dollars from her fanny pack, Ghaleh Maryam suggested that we

treat ourselves while she talked to my mother. Once we'd walked some half a block, Dari turned to me. "I'm keeping this," he said, pushing the money into his pocket. "Deal with it." I didn't protest. In fact, my mother had taught me never to accept money from anyone. "What? Can't you speak English?" I shook my head. "Fucking immigrants," he sighed, as if it were the saddest thing in the world. "I bet you don't even know what a woman's tits look like." When I didn't answer he came a step closer. "Please tell me you know what tits are." I continued to look at him blankly. "Man," he shook his head again. I was disappointing him, and whatever prospect he'd seen in our friendship was quickly waning. Above us, groups of starlings converged and puddled across the sky like ink; the collective beating of their wings sounded almost angry. "Come on," Dari said and walked away.

Inside the Corner Mart, Dari greeted the owner—an older man with two-day stubble and a gray ponytail—with a familiarity that I did not yet feel for the neighborhood. "We're having a yard sale," he announced. "The Mother Queen is selling a bunch of shit."

"You moving?" the owner asked.

"Hell no," Dari said, leaning across the counter and sliding over some bills. "But you know how women are." The owner gave a conspiratorial grin, then looked at me.

"Who is he?" he asked. A snake tattoo ran up the inside of his arm.

"Don't worry about him. He's fresh off the boat. Doesn't know his ass from a hole in the ground." The owner got up off his stool, placed a magazine into a brown bag, and slid it over the counter.

Outside the convenience store, Dari pinned me against the wall. "You're not a fucking snitch, are you?" he asked. His breath smelled of grape soda, his lips stained slightly purple. I shook my head. "Good. 'Cause if you want to hang with me, you've got to know how to keep your mouth shut. Come on." I asked him whether we were going back to our mothers. "Of course not." Instead, Dari took me to his hideout, a tree house in the back yard of an elderly couple whose grown children no longer used it. Once inside, he turned to peer down at me. "You coming up?" I pictured my mother looking for me, wondering where I had gone. I didn't want to worry her.

"I have to get back."

"Don't wet yourself, sweetheart. Just come up here a minute." The tree house was littered with candy wrappings, soda cans, and cigarette butts. Dari instructed me to take a seat on an overturned plastic crate. He did the same,

pulling a crate between us to serve as a table, and laid the paper bag down between us. It took me a few moments to understand what I was looking at once Dari ripped the plastic casing away. “Go on. Open it,” he said. “Now these are tits.”

When we returned to Dari’s house, my mother had purchased two rugs and several serving dishes. Ghaleh Maryam insisted that she take them without paying, but my mother refused, forcing several bills into her hand. Even though we only lived blocks apart, she gave Ghaleh Maryam our address, and later that night Dari’s parents drove over not only with the things my mother had purchased, but with everything else that hadn’t been sold in the yard sale, including a bag filled with clothes that Dari had outgrown. Amoo Essi made several trips to the car unloading its contents and flashed my mother a smile each time he passed. A tall man with a trim beard and broad shoulders, he towered over his wife. “This is too much.” My mother surveyed the pile in the middle of our living room. “I can’t accept all this.” After they left that night, my mother would repack many of Ghaleh Maryam’s old clothes, bath towels, and bed sheets, and place them in a closet, telling me there was good reason no one bought them at the yard sale. But to Ghaleh Maryam’s face, my mother appeared only grateful.

134

Ghaleh Maryam called me over and made me try on Dari’s old winter coat and several pairs of his winter boots. My mother watched me shrug into the coat and step into the boots, all a couple sizes too large, and agreed with Ghaleh Maryam that I would grow into them soon enough. In Iran our clothes were specially tailored, the fabric purchased from Milan; my mother had shopped along the Champs-Élysées. “They’re beautiful,” she lied, instructing me to turn in order to better judge the material.

Despite what our mothers told us, six years was a considerable difference at school, and our lives, mine in the third grade, Dari’s in eight, rarely converged. While I spent my day in the same classroom on the second floor, the walls plastered with student poems and artwork, Dari moved between rooms and had a different teacher for each subject. Whereas Dari kept his textbooks inside a locker with a three-digit code, I hung my coat on a hook at the back of the classroom and stored my flimsy notebooks inside my desk. During recess I wandered around the playground alone, while Dari played on the basketball court, one team in yellow mesh jerseys, the other in T-shirts. When Dari headed to his third period class, we lined up for lunch, his day

organized by the clock in a way that mine was not. We saw each other on the bus to and from school, and even then, didn't acknowledge the other with more than a nod because this was what Dari preferred.

While Dari and I were at school, his mother showed mine how to navigate the city. Ghaleh Maryam worked three days a week as an office assistant in a dental office in Arlington, penciling appointments, completing insurance forms, and processing payments. On her days off, she made my mother her project, helping her complete the necessary paperwork for our new lives. I grew used to the sight of our mothers in the kitchen when I returned from school, the table covered with papers filled with my mother's slanted, uneven handwriting. Two glasses of tea, which they would refill three times over the course of Ghaleh Maryam's visit, rested on the kitchen table between them. A white saucer collected the plum-colored pits of the dates they consumed. In the apartment, I would discover something new: placemats on the dining room table, a china teapot on the stove, green towels in the bathroom, signs of my mother's comings and goings in a city that was still a mystery to me.

Because my mother didn't own a car in those days and knew few Iranians, we were dependent on Dari's parents to get us anywhere not accessible by the T, driving down 93 to the South Shore, or west on 90 to Worcester, or north on 495 to Dracut, to dinner parties at the homes of seasoned Iranian immigrants with guest bedrooms and converted basements. Since Amoo Essi was a partner in an Iranian restaurant in town, Dari's family had many Iranian friends in Massachusetts that they introduced us to. My mother enjoyed those parties and found the presence of other Iranians reassuring, but her mood always grew foul when we returned to our own apartment. Our lives paled in comparison. She said as much to Ghaleh Maryam and Amoo Essi, wondering how long it would take to become established. "What's the rush?" Amoo Essi said. "If you ask me, you're the lucky one. You've got welfare. Why would you give that up? If I were you, I'd relax and let the government keep sending those checks." And though my mother hated to be beholden to anyone, she listened to Amoo Essi, and we remained on federal aid until it was no longer needed for our well-being.

135

By Thanksgiving we were close enough to Ghaleh Maryam and her family that she insisted my mother and I accompany them on their annual trip to Burlington, Vermont. We stayed with Amoo Essi's former college roommate, Sohrab, whose wife was born and raised in rural Vermont. Like Amoo Essi,

Sohrab had studied in the United States in the sixties; impressed by the freedoms and fun-loving women, he stayed after graduation. They named their four-year-old daughter Mandy, after a favorite pop song. My mother took issue with this, complaining to Ghaleh Maryam in private. As Sohrab's family in Iran passed away, so would his connection to the country of his birth. He would forget the Persian New Year in spring, the holy month of Ramadan in fall. Eventually, all traces of his culture would disappear and by the time his daughter was grown, would be forever lost. Ghaleh Maryam dismissed my mother, and I remember this as the first disagreement between them.

To the contrary, I saw nothing unhappy about Sohrab's marriage. He kissed his wife often on the lips, coming up behind her while she was busy in the kitchen and nuzzling her neck, causing Janet to laugh out loud and my mother to blush. Unlike our own house, the walls were decorated with family photographs: Janet and Sohrab posed on skis atop a mountain, Mandy shoveling sand into a yellow bucket, Janet's family grouped around a Christmas tree, red Santa hat atop Sohrab's head.

136 On Thanksgiving Eve, Amoo Essi suggested that the adults visit the old bar they frequented in their college days. Talk turned to calling a sitter for Dari, Mandy, and me, but my mother protested, volunteering to stay behind. "But you're our guest," Janet said. "You go and I'll stay."

"Impossible." My mother threw up her hands as if someone had pulled a gun on her. Ghaleh Maryam told Janet not to insist, that my mother wouldn't enjoy herself anyway. Now in her early thirties, my mother had never so much as tasted alcohol. Iranians like my mother, Ghaleh Maryam explained to Janet, could never feel comfortable in an American bar. The insult did not go unnoticed by my mother, as if she were the one lacking, the unsophisticated rube. Janet accepted my mother's decision, and that night, Dari and I watched movies while my mother tried to get Mandy to say the names of household objects in Farsi: *ghasoog* for spoon, *kehtob* for book. All night, Dari looked for a chance to sneak outside for a cigarette, but my mother's watchful eye foiled his plan. We went to bed sometime before eleven. "You're queer," Dari said before we fell asleep.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It means you're not normal."

To which I had no reply.

Later, my mother would tell me that Amoo Essi corralled everyone in after three in the morning, waking her up. She went downstairs to tell them to

quiet down, the children were asleep, and pretended not to be taken aback by their drunkenness, even when Amoo Essi repeatedly declared his love for everyone in the room. He leaned on my mother to steady himself, his breath hot in her ear, his body pressing up against her hip.

My mother would point to that night as an example of how she had sacrificed her youth, given up all frivolity, to stay with me. She too could have gone out to all hours drinking and dancing like Ghaleh Maryam, ignoring her responsibilities. But she didn't want to leave me alone. In exchange, she would make me promise that I wouldn't grow up and abandon her, that I would dedicate myself to my studies and become a doctor, marry a dutiful Iranian woman who would want her mother-in-law to live with her. When I pointed out that she had left her own mother, she became angry. "Because of you," she shouted as if she'd been waiting for me to say just those words. "So the war wouldn't take you too, as it did so many boys." I didn't know which boys she was referring to because war, as I understood it, was the province of men. My grandmother, before my mother's departure, had tried to persuade her not to leave. *You think you are the only mother in the world. There are other mothers, other sons, and they are living here, where they belong.* But my mother hadn't listened.

137

By Christmas, my mother began waiting tables at Amoo Essi's restaurant to supplement the welfare checks. He offered her the job soon after Vermont, and my mother, who was still listening to English conversation tapes, accepted. In Vienna, she explained that I wasn't to tell anybody about our past because my father had worked for the Islamic government, and exiles abroad might persecute us if they found out. The less people knew, the safer we would be. But after long days at work, her blouse stained with food, her hair dizzying around her head, she would often reminisce with me about Iran. In Tehran, the grounds were lined with orange and apple trees, the walkways bordered with roses. We used to have a nanny, cooks, gardeners, and a driver. Days would pass without my mother ever stepping into the kitchen. Now she practically lived in one. What was most difficult, however, was serving acquaintances she had met through her friendship with Ghaleh Maryam and Amoo Essi. While Ghaleh Maryam told her that nobody paid attention to such things in America, my mother suspected otherwise. She perceived a certain look, a change in tone, forced smiles whenever these people addressed her at the restaurant. Their eyes lingered a moment as she wiped down their

tables and carried their dirty dishes away. How could she wait on them one week, only to dine at their homes the next, as if nothing were wrong? Soon, she began declining invitations. Despite Ghaleh Maryam's attempts to convince her to be reasonable, my mother would not relent. She confided to me that if Ghaleh Maryam meant what she said, then why didn't she work in the restaurant instead of a doctor's office. It was her husband's restaurant, after all.

Still, my mother remained close with Ghaleh Maryam. On weekends, Ghaleh Maryam would drive my mother and me out to Natick or Braintree to shop at the malls, trips that on public transportation would have taken us all morning. Sometimes, Dari would come along, but unlike me, he had a choice of how to spend his days off from school. I would trail our mothers from store to store and watch as they perused the racks, soliciting my help to look for sale items. Ghaleh Maryam showed my mother how to switch tags, affixing a cheaper price to more expensive clothing. "Everybody does it," she said, when my mother expressed concern about getting caught. "Anyway," Ghaleh Maryam said, "this government has stolen plenty from our country. Now we return the favor." Dari's parents used the same logic in convincing my mother to remain on welfare and collect food stamps, citing America's endless meddling in Iran's political and economic affairs. Her reservations fell away once she witnessed Ghaleh Maryam successfully switch tags on repeated occasions, purchasing several cashmere sweaters for a fraction of their price. There was a form of justice in Ghaleh Maryam's logic that appealed to my mother. She was merely reclaiming what history had taken away, rebuilding our lives through the acquisition of things.

The parties, when we did attend, were exclusively Iranian. While my mother no longer wished to go, she did not prevent me from attending, and in fact, insisted I accompany Dari. Meanwhile, she began working dinner shifts at the restaurant on Friday and Saturday nights, often arriving home only moments before I was dropped off. Adults often mistook me for Dari's brother. At first the error made me feel guilty, knowing that my mother was at work while everyone else's parents were not. But over the course of the evening, I would forget my mother, distracted by our play. Dari, usually the oldest, invented games adapted from comic books or television shows, casting us into roles of his choosing. We played with the abandon of young boys, flinging each other across the room, stretching our shirt collars, our hair matted to our foreheads with sweat. At these parties, Dari astounded

me with his ability to act like a good Iranian boy. He never took out a nudie magazine or made dirty jokes like he did in the clubhouse. I learned from him that I could keep secrets from my own mother and could control what she knew of my life.

Despite my exhaustion at the end of these evenings, my mother would insist on hearing every detail, from what was served for dinner to who attended. I hated her then and would provide only the vaguest answers. "Why are you acting this way?" she asked me. I was angry that she refused to attend the parties like other parents, orphaning me there because of her pride. I resented how she so easily left me in the care of strangers without ever wondering what might happen. But I never said any of this to her. Instead, I admitted that in the past several months I had seen, in the medicine cabinet, the roll of money that Ghaleh Maryam would occasionally leave for us. "She gives you extra money so you can come to the parties," I cried. "So you can be normal, like other mothers. But you don't even care about me." I wasn't sure what I was accusing her of, only that I was angry and blamed her. For a moment my mother was stunned speechless by my outburst, before she slapped me hard across the face.

139

By the time I started fourth grade and Dari ninth, I was no longer hesitant with the English language and had lost all trace of an accent. While I hadn't made any best friends at school, I no longer sat alone at lunch or wandered around the playground during recess by myself. In class, I worked hard to impress my teachers, to get good grades because my mother demanded them of me. A child's worth is only measured by his manners, she said, and good manners translated into good grades. Only children who neglected their studies got into trouble, talked back to their parents. She would not raise me to be such a son.

Since beginning high school, Dari had moved to a different building miles from my own and was by all accounts becoming difficult. He began arguing with his parents for more freedom, wanting to spend his weekends with friends instead of going to Iranian parties. The summer before, Dari's body began to change, and unlike the other boys in his class, he grew a mustache and shot up five inches. While I had known about his sex drive, our parents, it seemed, were clueless. Dari had made friends with other boys in high school and had brought them to the clubhouse and shown them his collection of nudie magazines, which bolstered his reputation. Whenever

he invited his classmates, he assigned me to the foot of the tree to serve as lookout while he and his friends ogled the magazines, told dirty jokes, and smoked cigarettes. I couldn't stay home for fear that my mother would suspect something was wrong between Dari and me, and on those Saturday mornings, I would sit and read at the foot of the tree, the sound of Dari's friends' laughter above me like a murder of crows.

In early March, Dari and I received an invitation to a birthday party for a mutual friend whom we knew from our parents' weekly parties. Instead of holding the celebration at home, as our parents would have done, Reza's parents decided to reserve the back room of an Italian restaurant in Boston. "Next they'll just ask us to mail the gifts and pick up our meals at the door," my mother said as we rode the T to Downtown Crossing in order to buy Reza a present at Filene's Basement. Even though I knew Reza wanted a new Nintendo game for his birthday, I thought better than to mention it, knowing it was not in my mother's budget. Inside the store, I followed her while she sorted through the racks, squeezing by other women, keeping a close eye on neighboring shoppers. She told me to search for a spring jacket, something that looked expensive and would impress Reza's parents and their friends.

140

She patrolled the discount racks as if the merchandise might jump off the hangers and walk away. I searched next to her until she yelled at me. "Why are you underneath my feet? There—" She pointed a few aisles over, where a prominent "60% OFF" sign was displayed. "Go on."

Near the end of the rack, I came across a blue and red Nautica jacket with mesh underarms and brought it to my mother. She took it from me and held it against my chest to gauge how it would look on Reza. But when she lifted the right sleeve and found the price tag, the excitement disappeared from her face. "One hundred and twenty dollars," she said, looking at me as if I was the one who had priced it. I shrugged, moving to put the jacket back. She stopped me. "Hold on," she said, wedging the jacket into a space between other clothes. With her fingernail, she began to peel the sticker.

"What are you doing?" I asked, suddenly frightened.

"Quiet," she said without looking at me. "Just stand close by." I watched as my mother switched the price tags, affixing to the jacket a sticker that read forty-five dollars. At the register, she paid in cash.

Before we could leave the store, two men and a woman approached us and asked to look inside the bag. At first I thought that they were acquaintances, perhaps customers she'd waited on in the restaurant, their voices low, almost

familiar. But then the woman flashed her badge, and even though my mother had never seen one before, she handed the bag to the female officer who looked inside, pulling out the price tag. She instructed us to follow them. We walked past the registers, the discount racks, past the fitting rooms and through an unmarked door that opened into a back room with a rectangular table and some orange plastic chairs. My mother's face had gone white. She didn't say a word.

Once we were seated, the female officer explained that she'd seen my mother alter the price tags. "Did you do it?" she asked. But my mother remained silent. The policewoman repeated the question, and it sounded harsher hearing it a second time. "Do you understand? Do you speak English?"

"This is mistake," my mother finally managed. Her voice made me nervous because it sounded injured, registering a note that I'd never heard before. She'd never had any interaction with American authorities, and I'm certain she wondered what they might do to her. Perhaps she thought about Iran, how people who were stopped and taken into questioning sometimes disappeared.

"Are you saying that you didn't switch the tags?" The woman looked nothing like a police officer; her red hair was cut shoulder length, tied in a clip at the nape of her neck. She wore a green blouse and khaki pants, carried a brown leather handbag that she'd placed on the table. She reminded me of my classmates' mothers who waited outside the school in station wagons after the dismissal bell, the kind who packed notes inside lunchboxes and chaperoned on field trips. "Is that your statement?" Her voice, while not loud, was sharp, as if she was reading from a script in view of her boss. My mother looked at me, her expression confused, like she'd misplaced her keys and was mentally retracing her steps. In the months that it took us to cross three continents, the rooms we'd waited in, the fear of being sent back to Iran forever at our heels, I'd never seen my mother as quiet as she was in the back room of Filene's Basement.

"I'm thinking it is sale," she said, the little English she'd learned crumbling under stress.

"Don't lie," the woman said, her thin lips disappearing into a frown. "We have cameras in the store. This would be easier if you'd simply cooperate." While I'd been silent just moments before, I started to cry, softly at first so that no one noticed until I was gasping, sounding a wail that made the

policewoman sit up in her chair. She looked to her partners as if they'd done something to incite my outburst. There was no calming me. My fear was real, unabated. Later, my mother would tell me that the sound of my cries did something to her, called out her motherly instincts, and untied her frozen tongue. She pulled me to her, wrapped her arms around me. I buried my face against her chest. My entire body heaved, and I shook so hard that she was shaking, too.

"Gayreh nakon Omid-jahn," she repeated into my ear. Even though I wanted to listen to her, I couldn't stop crying. We'd crossed borders in the backs of trucks, sat before immigration officers, our fates poised on the tips of their pens. We'd been lost in different cities with no one to call to come and find us. And yet, I had never let her know how frightened I'd been. Keeping quiet about the past, about my fears, is the only way I have ever known how to be a good son. But the American officers inside that room with their badges and guns and sullen expressions were more than I could contain. The female officer stood up, told one of the men to fetch some water.

142

"Here," she said, holding out a cup, "sip this." I took the cup with both hands but couldn't stop shaking until she helped me steady it to my lips. "Are you okay?" she asked, a new tenderness in her voice, and my eyes welled up afresh. I shook my head and looked into the cup where the room's fluorescent light reflected. "Can you call someone," she asked my mother after I'd caught my breath, "to translate?"

At first, my mother thought to call Ghaleh Maryam, but she suspected, correctly, that under similar pressure, her English would fail as well. Instead, she called the restaurant where Amoo Essi was completing paperwork that afternoon. She explained the situation in Farsi, her gaze fixed on the floor. As she spoke, the female officer took my empty water cup away and motioned one of the men to refill it.

I'm not sure what Amoo Essi said to the officers, but they spoke for what seemed like an hour, during which he and my mother signed several papers. In the end, they let my mother go with a warning, banning her from shopping at any Filene's Basement for a period of five years. Amoo Essi told us to wait outside the store, and ten minutes later, he emerged with the jacket, handing it to me even though I wanted nothing to do with it ever again. "Chetori, Omid?" he asked as if it were any other day. I said that I was fine because no other words came to mind. When we got to Amoo Essi's car, he told me to get in and shut the door while he and my mother remained talking

outside. With his back to me, I couldn't make out my mother's face, but when they got inside the car, neither said a word on the drive back to Watertown.

Even though I didn't want to go, my mother insisted that I attend Reza's birthday party. "Don't mention what happened today to anybody," she said, "even Dari." I agreed, and when an hour later I sat waiting for Amoo Essi to pick me up, my face still hot from the tears, dressed in a collared shirt, the jacket gift-wrapped in a box on my lap, my mother came into the living room to sit with me. "Were you very scared, Omid?" she asked. I shook my head. "You know," she said, "your tears saved me. I prayed to God something would happen to make them tender to us. Otherwise, they might have sent me to jail."

At the party, the adults sat at a separate table, while the kids gathered around Reza, who was especially proud of having his party in a restaurant. He'd invited several of his American friends, the first time that I'd ever seen them at an Iranian gathering. Reza started a contest to see who could eat the most slices of pizza, but I had no appetite and only played along half-heartedly, managing two slices before I felt sick. Amoo Essi, who had planned to stay for the party, changed his mind after dropping us off, and told us that he would be by later to pick us up. "This party's queer," Dari whispered to me. He eyed the exit, then the parents talking loudly at their table, as if to determine whether he could make his escape undetected. He fiddled with the pack of cigarettes inside his pocket. "They still think we're fucking five years old." I was silent; normally, I would corroborate whatever Dari said. But I couldn't speak then, for fear of confessing what had happened at Filene's Basement. How I cried like a baby until Dari's father had come to save us. "What's wrong with you?" Dari asked. Before I could answer, three waiters in red aprons brought out Reza's birthday cake, and everyone started singing, all eyes on the flickering candles, Reza's glowing cheeks.

Once the dishes were cleared away, Reza mowed through his pile of gifts, shredding the gift wrap into pieces at his feet. Dari had bought Reza the Nintendo game he'd wanted, an extra controller, and several comic books. Everyone leaned close to Reza to get a better look, but Dari leaned back in his chair, licking a glob of icing off his index finger. Reza shouted *thanks* from across the room, holding up the gifts in the air for everyone to see. When he opened my present, he looked at the jacket and handed it to his mother without trying it on. His mother inspected the jacket. "Nautica," she announced

to the other adults at the table, who nodded in approval, before she folded the jacket and stuffed it inside a plastic bag, along with Reza's other presents.

Later, Reza hugged me, pinning my arms to my side. "Thanks for the present. It's really generous." But I knew that no one really thought so. Dari's present cost twice as much, at least. Reza hadn't sought out any of the other kids to thank them. I pictured his mother pulling him aside to say that my mother was poor; we couldn't afford the jacket, so he should show his gratitude. I felt a roomful of eyes watching, waiting. It made sense then, why my mother had avoided the weekend parties, why she grew so angry whenever she found the roll of money Ghaleh Maryam left in our medicine cabinet.

"You're welcome," I said.

Dari came up to me as Reza walked away. "It's a nice jacket," he said. I wondered what he'd overheard. Whether his father had told him about Filene's Basement. Whether he looked at me and saw what everyone else did: a lonely kid with a single mother on welfare. I couldn't bring myself to ask, not that night, not ever. "You know," Dari said, "I think I found a way out." He pointed to the side door that led to the alley. He pulled out what I would later learn was a joint and palmed it. "I need you to cover me."

144

By the fall of 1987, my mother got a job looking after the children of a wealthy family who lived in Newton and quit the restaurant. She purchased a four-door red Hyundai, so we no longer caught rides in Dari's family's car. Although she never mentioned the incident at Filene's Basement again, I detected a change in her behavior. She no longer went shopping with Ghaleh Maryam on the weekends or allowed me to play at Dari's house alone. When friends called to invite us to parties, my mother began accepting, to my surprise. We had moved out of the house owned by the Unitarian Church of Arlington Street by then and into another apartment on the other side of Watertown, bordering Waltham, too great a distance to ride my bike past Dari's house. While we still occasionally saw Dari and his parents at the weekend parties, I no longer came home to find Ghaleh Maryam in the kitchen with my mother. "Everybody is busy in America," my mother said when I asked her about it. "There is little time for the ways of the past." Eventually, all the things that Ghaleh Maryam had given us at the yard sale when we first met were replaced with new purchases from Jordan Marsh and T.J. Maxx, so that soon, any trace of Dari's family disappeared from our lives. By then, my mother had made other friends, ones not connected with Dari's family.

We began attending parties where Dari and his parents were not present, and they no doubt went places where we weren't invited, a space growing between our families that seemed inevitable and beyond our control.

Then, in the summer of 1988, Ghaleh Maryam called my mother to inform her that she and Dari would be leaving Massachusetts. My mother was stunned by this news. Unlike other Iranians who left Boston for towns in California or Virginia, Dari and his mother would be going back to Iran. Amoo Essi, however, would remain in Watertown to see after their financial affairs. "Perhaps they are getting separated," my mother said to me, unconvinced of Ghaleh Maryam's explanation. "I wouldn't be surprised. The things men can do." But rumors circulated about Dari. That he had gotten into trouble with alcohol and drugs and girls. By then, he and I had virtually ceased communication. Is it true, my mother wanted to know, about Dari?

But I kept my promise to him made all those years ago outside the convenience store, perhaps from a sense of duty, or perhaps from the knowledge that sometimes you didn't gain anything by speaking. I never told her about the cigarettes, booze, magazines, or the day I didn't listen to Dari and quietly climbed the tree and peeked into the clubhouse to find him and his friends standing in a circle, their pants around their ankles, jerking off. I don't know whether Dari ever suspected that I knew what he did up there with his friends, but he never questioned me about it, never tried to pull me into his secret life. I was only ever a witness.

At a farewell dinner party thrown in honor of their departure by mutual friends, Ghaleh Maryam asked my mother whether there was anything she'd like her to carry back to Iran, a letter, or clothing, or photographs of our lives in the United States. But my mother said there was nothing that she wished to send, having prepared herself for the inevitable day when we would return as American citizens, bearing the prosperity of that title with our own hands. "What happened to us?" Ghaleh Maryam asked. "We were such good friends." My mother did not tell her the truth then. Instead, she blamed it on the burdens of life in America. She did not mention the day we were caught by police and questioned inside the back room of a department store. She didn't tell Ghaleh Maryam how, as she held my shaking body, she cursed the day that they'd ever met. Back then, my mother still believed that Iranians were good, that their only intention was to help one another. It had taken years for her to learn that by taking Dari's parents' advice and remaining on welfare, she had delayed any chance to build credit, would never be

approved for loans, and the idea of buying her own house was then but a distant fantasy. She didn't tell Ghaleh Maryam how, when she called Amoo Essi that day, he arrived and belittled her in front of the police, treated her as if she were a blundering child. How after we left the store and walked to his car, Amoo Essi propositioned her while I sat sniffing inside, waiting to go home. He would take care of her, Amoo Essi said, if she would begin an affair. Later, after he dropped Dari and me at Reza's party, he returned to our house. He tried to kiss my mother. And she let him. Once. Then she asked him to leave, and within weeks quit her job at his restaurant. My mother told none of this to Ghaleh Maryam and only confessed it to me years later.

Still, I always wondered why my mother never told Ghaleh Maryam the truth, and what Ghaleh Maryam must have said to my mother as their friendship began to dissolve. There must have been an afternoon while I was in school when Ghaleh Maryam appeared on our doorstep, carrying a cake. She would have come inside, and my mother would have been gracious enough to put on the tea, to cut a slice of cake for each of them. They would have gossiped about the Iranians they knew, related the latest news about their own families back in Iran. She would look around our apartment for signs of our suffering. She wouldn't have been convinced by my mother's explanation for leaving the restaurant. She wouldn't have believed that my mother was too busy to make time for her. After the second glass of tea, Ghaleh Maryam would have excused herself to use the restroom. Inside, she would have opened the medicine cabinet and tucked the roll of bills between the Tylenol and cough syrup. Closing the medicine cabinet door, she would have seen her own reflection and smiled for what she had done, what she was continuing to do for my mother and me despite my mother's quitting the restaurant. Back in the living room, my mother would have refilled their tea glasses, wise to her. She would have waited for Ghaleh Maryam to return and take her seat. Then, she would have gone straight into the bathroom and retrieved the roll of bills. She would have placed the money on the living room table between the glasses of tea and the side plates littered with cake crumbs. Then she would have spoken clearly. *We are just fine, thank you.* Ghaleh Maryam would have tried to protest. *It is nothing, it makes me happy to help, you are a single mother, think of Omid.* My mother would not have backed down. A roomful of people watching would not have changed her then or made her say what they wanted to hear. She would have said, *That is exactly who I am thinking about.*