

The Baboon

Suzi Ehtesham-Zadeh
(7,976 words)

Night falls suddenly in the *bagh*. It seems to drop down from above without warning, like a curtain closing against the day. Just before the generator is started up and the lights go on, there is a moment when the sky is vast and deep. The stars are so numerous and so immediate that they appear to be in motion, like handfuls of luminescent sand tossed by a celestial giant.

As soon as they spot the artificial light, the moths come immediately, out of nowhere, and hurl themselves toward light bulbs and lanterns. Some of them have wings the size of human hands, and others are tiny and transparent; barely there at all. In their frenzied rush toward the light, some of them crash into the glass of the light bulbs and lanterns and their wings melt in an instant, leaving their desperate bodies writhing on the scalding surface without a means of escape. Others, mistaking the reflection from the open glasses of *araq* as a light source, are driven toward the glowing liquid, where they flutter for a moment, then drown.

Over the years, Pedar-jan has collected the moths. He has pinned them, with their wings spread open, to pieces of cardboard painted to match the color of the sky, and has covered them with glass frames which line the walls of his home in the *bagh*. He is not a scientist; his interest in the moths has always been purely aesthetic. Roya remembers studying the impaled creatures when she was a child and finding them fearsome even though she knew they were dead and locked inside of glass cases. Tonight, as she stands on the balcony of her grandfather's home and witnesses the astonishing transition from the cosmic to the terrestrial—from the vast, star-laden sky to the desperate fluttering of the fragile creatures around the artificial light—she finds the moths beautiful and tragic.

Beyond the balcony, in the distance, Roya can make out the shadowy outlines of the mountains and trees, barely visible behind the curtain of night. These contours have not changed since she was last here as a child, and although she is not surprised by this fact, she feels suddenly moved by it. Almost everything else has changed in the fifteen years she has been away, but this landscape has been the same for generations, perhaps centuries. Pedar-jan saw this same view as a child, as did his grandfather. Looking at it is like looking back in time.

She pulls her vision in closer and glances across the balcony at her husband Andrew. She wants to tell him about the unchanging tree line, and she wants to see if he is noticing the moths. But Andrew seems lost in his own thoughts, and she decides not to intrude. He doesn't have to see everything through her eyes.

She turns back toward the mountains and shakes her head to feel the breeze fluttering through her hair. This sensation, like her memory of the stars and the moths, helps her feel that she belongs here—that this is, in a sense, her home. She spent every summer of her childhood in this *bagh* in the company of her cousins, riding donkeys, climbing mountains, and picking fruit straight from the trees. The Islamic government was fully entrenched by the time Roya was born, but there had been no repressive regime to contend with in this beautiful patch of land nestled in the Zagros Mountains. Despite three decades of tyranny, there still isn't.

She hears a voice on the balcony behind her and turns to see Farideh, the much younger woman Pedar-jan married after Roya's grandmother died. Roya had never met Farideh before this morning, but she feels a sudden bond with this woman who takes care of her grandfather; this stranger who now occupies a deeper place within the family than Roya herself. Farideh is

wearing an apron and her hair is fastened above the nape of her neck in a tight bun. She stands at the edge of the balcony and bends slightly at the waist in a gesture that is not quite a bow.

Be-farma-eed sham. “Dinner is served.”

The gamey smell of lamb hits them full force as they rise from their seats and move from the balcony into the dining room. On the table in front of them sits a veritable feast: mountains of steaming rice with several kinds of *khoresh*, fresh *naan* baked in the neighboring village, lamb and chicken *kabab*; eggplant *dolmeh* and stuffed grape leaves. They stand at attention and wait until Pedar-jan is seated before arranging themselves around the table. Farideh serves her husband, then the others begin to pass the platters around the table in a circular motion.

Roya cannot quite believe that she is sitting across the table from her grandfather for the first time as an adult. Pedar-jan has been a gentleman farmer all his life and probably has no more than a sixth-grade education, but she has always considered him the most sophisticated and erudite person she knows. She was worried that her Farsi might have atrophied after fifteen years of living in the United States, but it comes back to her in a flood and she understands every nuance of the conversation. She is so giddy with emotion that she forgets to translate for Andrew—in fact she almost forgets that her husband is there.

It is Pedar-jan who finally addresses him. Roya dutifully translates the exchange between her husband and her grandfather.

“Agha-An-de-roo,” he says, stumbling over the consonant cluster. “How do you like the Islamic Republic so far?”

Roya translates Pedar-jan’s words exactly, although she finds it curious that he refers to the country this way rather than calling it Iran. Like all the members of her Iranian family, Pedar-jan is bitterly opposed to the Islamic government that seized power decades earlier and still has a stranglehold over the nation.

Andrew, too, seems surprised by the question. He looks at Roya quizzically, as if the right answer might be written on her face.

“I haven’t seen much in the five days we’ve been here, but from what I’ve seen so far it’s a beautiful country.”

Pedar-jan chuckles softly. “I don’t see how this dry, forgotten land of ours can seem beautiful to someone from *Am-ree-ka*. But you must visit the village tomorrow. You do not have villages in your country, I am told.”

“I would be honored to go there.”

Roya is not certain she knows the correct word for *honored*, but she manages to transmit her husband’s meaning to Pedar-jan. He looks at Andrew and gives him a smile that carries a touch of disdain.

“It is not an honor, An-de-roo-joon. The villagers are just people, after all. They are not actors in an American movie.”

Andrew sits in silence for a minute, trying to interpret the tone behind the old man’s words. He swallows audibly.

“Of course not,” he says. “They don’t make American movies about Iranian villagers.”

Roya studies her husband across the dinner table. He is trying to look casual, but discomfort glimmers beneath the surface of his expression. His slender body is leaning forward in a way that suggests great interest, but there is tension in his limbs. He has taken great pains with his dress tonight; he looks well-groomed and handsome. His long, sandy-colored hair has been slicked back so he will seem less conspicuously foreign. He is trying.



Roya had met Andrew four years earlier at Stanford, when she was in her senior year as a philosophy student and he was midway through his graduate degree in political science. As they stood face to face under the porch light of her friend's house in Palo Alto and conversed, red wine in hand, she had been transfixed by his opalescent eyes and the strange combination of optimism and cynicism that seemed to be permanently etched on his face. She caught herself scanning his suntanned, athletic body up and down as he bent to pick up the shrimp that, in her nervousness, had fallen from the toothpick in her hand.

It wasn't just Andrew's physical appearance that attracted her. She had never known anyone with such effortless candor or such incisive, well-informed judgments about the state of the world. When she learned of his humble origins—he was the son of an insurance salesman and a librarian from a small town in Vermont—she was even more smitten. In addition to awakening her feminine desires, Andrew kindled in her a yearning for rebellion against the repressive, scripted existence she had hitherto been living as the daughter of wealthy Iranian parents. She had read her Marx and Engels, her Rousseau, and her Nietzsche. Andrew was all of their visions rolled into one and wrapped in sexy packaging: a working-class hero, a diamond in the rough, a noble savage, and an *übermensch*. They moved in together almost right away, and got married a year later.

Roya's parents, who fled Iran when she was eight and moved to the city they playfully called "Tehrangeles," initially opposed the marriage, but soon resigned themselves to their American son-in-law. It was partly at their urging that Roya made the decision to return to Iran to visit her paternal grandfather, the family patriarch. Pedar-jan was eighty-five, and Roya's parents felt it was important for him to see his oldest granddaughter again and meet her American husband before he died.

When Roya announced to Andrew that she wanted to take him with her to visit her aging grandfather, he didn't hesitate for a second. "Great idea!" he said, and the very next day he began researching what he had to do to secure a visa. Roya herself had almost changed her mind on more than one occasion during the months-long ordeal that preceded their trip, but Andrew reacted to the entire process with utter sangfroid. It was Andrew who located a Shiite mosque in California that would give him the "religious instruction" he needed in order to convert to Islam so that Roya wouldn't have to marry out of the faith—an act that was punishable by death in the Islamic Republic. He came home from each of the eight sessions with a humorous anecdote to share.

"Can you believe I convinced that guy that I actually turn toward *Qebleh* twice a day from the living room of our apartment and pray?" he said after one session. "I mean how do they think we're supposed to find the direction of Mecca from Mountain View?"

Another night when he returned, Andrew announced to her that in order to marry her he had been given the Muslim name "Abdullah", which meant "servant of Allah."

"That's the height of irony, isn't it? If only they knew what a hardcore atheist I am!"

Roya was just as much of an atheist as Andrew, but somehow it bothered her that her husband derived such enjoyment out of fooling a mullah. He laughed at his own mispronunciation of the Quran verses he was forced to recite from memory, as if the whole religion, and the culture that had produced it, was one big joke.

There had been many times during the months leading up to the trip when Roya had found herself at her wit's end, on the verge of canceling the trip altogether. But Andrew's

amusement at the Iranian bureaucracy—which he called “Kafkaesque”—bordered on patronizing, and she had sometimes felt the need to bite her tongue.



If anything has disturbed Andrew since their arrival in the Islamic Republic, he has done a good job of hiding it. Roya herself has had more difficulty adjusting. From the moment she first glimpsed her country from the air, she has been keenly aware of her own alienation. The grey haze of Tehran rising up from the desert reminded her of a scene from a dystopian movie. Plowed fields cut across the land at angles and colored segments of it in muted shades of green. She was too far up to determine what was growing in the fields, and her knowledge of her long-lost homeland was not sufficient for her to make an informed guess. The straightness of the rows impressed her, but she could not feel a connection to the ant-sized laborers she imagined toiling down there, thousands of feet below.

The last time she visited Iran she was only twelve, and though she was technically required to wear a *hejab* she was still childlike enough to get by without doing so. This time, as the plane descended toward Mehrabad Airport, she had no choice but to get out of her seat and go into the tiny airplane bathroom to transform herself so that she could enter her country as a woman. In her purse she carried a makeshift *roopoosh-roosaree*. The headscarf had been fashioned from a dull gray fabric remnant she had bought at Walmart, and she had found an old raincoat to substitute for a *roopoosh*. There was barely enough space in the tiny toilet to extend her arms, but she slipped the raincoat on over her clothes, leaving the sash open to avoid accentuating the contours of her body, then fastened the headscarf tightly beneath her chin. When she leaned in to examine her reflection in the distorted bathroom mirror, she barely recognized herself: she looked like a nun wearing a mismatched habit. It seemed to her that her head had shrunk and that she herself had somehow grown smaller.

She caught Andrew’s eye as she navigated the aisle back toward her seat. She could tell that he was startled by the transformation, but true to form, he covered his reaction with an attempt at humor. He flashed her a mock-salacious smile as she sat down beside him. “Wow! You look amazing!” he whispered. “Makes me want to rip all those clothes off and see what’s underneath.”

“Nice try, Andrew. You know I look ridiculous,” she answered.

She was so aware of how ridiculous she looked that she could feel her face burning as she entered the terminal and walked with her husband down the long corridor toward border control. Andrew had not undergone a transformation before entering the airport, but somehow he looked ridiculous too. He was a full head taller than most of the other passengers, and his blond hair, which swirled around his head like a lion’s mane, seemed to be a defiant proclamation of his alien presence in the dark-haired crowd.

Even when the border patrol subjected Andrew to an interrogation, he remained as calm as the sphinx.

“Which side will you fight on in the war?”

“Which war?”

“The one that’s coming. The United States and Israel against Iran.”

“Neither side.”

Roya’s heart had pounded so violently when she translated this exchange that she felt certain it was visible beneath her *roopoosh*. Her Farsi was rusty after so many years away, and seeing a Kalashnikov rifle at such close range didn’t help to put her at ease. But the customs

official had been too fascinated by Andrew to pay much attention to her nervousness or her grammar. His face broke into a toothy smile as he welcomed them both to Iran, sending them directly under the stadium-sized banner that read *MARG BAR AMREEKA*: “DEATH TO AMERICA.”

They were mostly silent during the taxi ride from the airport to the family apartment in northern Tehran where they would be staying. Roya looked out the window and tried to experience the ride as she imagined Andrew might be experiencing it: a bombardment on all the senses at once. The taxi careened, making nausea-producing curves through the winding streets of the city. The amalgam of odors that wafted through the open windows of the cab were unfamiliar even to Roya herself, so surely they were discomfiting to Andrew’s sense of smell. The walls along the streets were covered in garish murals, some decrying American and Israeli imperialism, others depicting heroes of the Revolution and martyrs from the Iran-Iraq war. Beneath these murals, clusters of bearded youths smoked cigarettes, laughed, and shoved one another playfully. Children ran to and from in the alleys, kicking cheap plastic balls. Women scurried from shop to shop toting bags that overflowed with fruits, vegetables, bread, pastries.

As they ascended through the city’s uphill slope toward distant Mt. Damavand, they passed by a number of historic places Roya knew would appeal to Andrew’s hunger for cultural exposure: the labyrinthine bazaar; Azadi Square where many had been killed in protests against the Shah; the sprawling cemetery where Khomeini was buried that was a city unto itself. If nothing else, her husband would cull from this taxi ride enough material for a colorful blog or email to his friends back home.

As soon as they entered the apartment Roya began to sense Andrew’s unspoken assessments of what he saw—assessments that he was already formulating into sentences in his mind. He might call the tapestry on the wall “quaint” even though it was a cheap machine-made imitation. He would label the *gilim* “tribal” even though the women who had woven it belonged to no tribe. He would surely draw a connection between the color of the walls, which were a pale ochre, and the desert he knew comprised most of Iran’s topography. Even though Andrew was mostly silent as he moved through the apartment, Roya could almost hear the sentences he was composing in his mind, and could feel his smug pleasure at his own brilliance.

It was late by the time they unpacked and they were too exhausted to go anywhere, so their first meal in Iran was takeout kabab from the restaurant down the street.

“Are you jet-lagged?” Roya asked Andrew as she spooned yogurt onto her plate.

“No, I don’t think so. Just a little overwhelmed. You don’t need to worry about me, sweetheart. I’m really happy to be here. I’m good.”

Roya had always hated the expression “I’m good,” and it sounded especially jarring to her now. She wasn’t sure how he could feel happy or “good” when her own feelings had already run the gamut from horror to nostalgia, from sorrow to warmth, from panic to exhilaration. It was frustrating how Andrew’s reactions throughout the day had muddled her own. She had tried to see through his eyes while at the same time adjusting what she was seeing to what she remembered, knew, and believed about her country. But she didn’t have the energy to explain all of this to Andrew now.

After dinner they went downstairs to the patio below the apartment building and sat next to each other on a bench. It was energizing to be outside. The night air was cool, and the sky was unusually clear for Tehran. Here in the north of the city there were no unpleasant odors of car exhaust and rotting fruit, and Roya detected a faint scent of geraniums from the balconies and porches of the neighboring houses. The sounds of Tehran traffic were muffled by the trees.

In the distance, they could hear voices rising up from the rooftops.

“*Allah-o-Akbar! Allah-o-Akbar! Allah-o-Akbar! Allah-o-Akbar!*”

Roya did not believe in Allah, but the chanting sounded soothing as it reverberated through the sky. Andrew’s hand was in hers, and she was just about to rest her head on his shoulder when his voice rose up in the darkness. At first she wasn’t certain she was hearing him correctly, but then he said the words again, and there was no mistaking what he was saying.

“Hello, Akbar! Hello, Akbar! Hello, Akbar!”

There was a slight snicker in his voice, and he squeezed her hand as if he thought she would share in the joke. She did not squeeze back.

On their first foray out into the Tehran streets the next morning, Roya was reminded again how out of touch she was with her country. The women sashayed through the streets in brightly colored *roosarees* draped seductively around their shoulders, exposing lots of hair and drawing attention to their heavily made-up faces. Their *roopooshes* were form-fitting and ended just above the knee, and beneath the tunics their legs were covered in skin-tight leggings. That same afternoon, Roya went to a surprisingly upscale shopping mall in north Tehran to buy a more contemporary Islamic costume.

But she didn’t have to wear the costume for long. They were leaving that afternoon for the *bagh*, and she knew that once she was there she would be freed from the absurd garb altogether. She was eager for her husband to see what she considered to be the true Iran—the magical Iran of her grandfather’s *bagh*. She wanted Andrew to meet her grandfather, which was, after all, the reason why they were here.

Most of all, she wanted to look into Pedar-jan’s eyes and see herself there.



After dinner is over Farideh invites them back out to the balcony, where she has arranged a low table with a tray that holds a bottle of *araq*, a bucket of ice, sliced limes, and several clean glasses. Roya and Andrew sit together on the carpet and lean back against the cushions that line the periphery of the balcony. The mountain air is cold, and they drape themselves with quilts, leaving only their arms exposed so that they can sip their drinks.

Pedar-jan, who occupies the central spot on the carpet which covers the floor of the balcony, pulls a sweater on. He leans back against the overstuffed cushions that have been arranged along the balcony rail, and motions to his wife.

“Farideh-joon,” he says, “tell Mustafa to bring my *manqal*.”

Social hierarchies have not changed much in Iran despite the Revolution: the *bagh* has been in Roya’s family since the time of the Qajar dynasty, and was handed down to Pedar-jan complete with workers from the neighboring village who still labor in the cherry orchards and vineyards under a system that still resembles feudalism. Nevertheless, Roya is surprised that her grandfather still has a serving boy, and still gives orders to him indirectly through his wife. She has been away for so long that ordering servants no longer seems like a natural human interaction to her.

But she is not surprised by the order itself. Pedar-jan has been an opium addict since before she was born, and she knows that asking for his *manqal* after dinner is his custom each night. She witnessed the ritual of opium smoking each summer throughout her childhood, and despite her many years of absence she remembers the routine. The *manqal*, a bronze vessel heaped with lumps of red-hot charcoal, will be placed on the carpet in front of Pedar-jan. He will pull his pipe from its velvet pouch, warm it over the charcoal, stick a small dot of opium on

it over the pinhole, then lift a piece of charcoal from the *manqal* and hold it over the opium until it begins to melt and sizzle. After Pedar-jan himself smokes, he will invite the other adults to indulge, motioning for each to approach the *manqal* in turn.

Earlier this evening Roya tried to prepare Andrew for this moment, explaining that Pedar-jan would invite him, and possibly Roya herself, to smoke with him after dinner this evening. They must accept the offer; it was a matter of courtesy. Andrew already knew that Pedar-jan was an addict, so she did not expect him to react with such horror. Her attempt to calm him down had come out sounding like an attack.

“You know, you don’t have to believe everything your puritanical culture says about opium,” she had said. “There’s a lot of misinformation there—and a lot of hypocrisy too. Did you know the Forbes family made their fortune by capitalizing on the Chinese opium trade back in the nineteenth century?”

“Yeah, so what?” Andrew had answered. “What I worry about is the addiction aspect of it, not the money aspect. “Ever read *Confessions of an Opium Addict*?” He had annoying habit of citing books to make a point.

“Yes, Andrew, I’ve read it. But takes years to become an addict, trust me. Whenever I had a toothache as a kid, Pedar-jan used to put a piece of opium on my tooth. If I had an earache, he blew opium in my ear.”

“I don’t have a toothache or an earache, though. Maybe I’ll need morphine when I’m on my deathbed, but I don’t need it now.”

Roya persisted. “People all over the world have been smoking opium for thousands of years. It’s still used as an anesthetic to perform surgery in some places. It might surprise you to know that lot of people you respect were famous opium users: Freud, Poe and Dickens to name a few. Even Florence Nightingale was supposedly an addict.”

“You said the word. *Addict*.”

“Oh my God, Andrew. Since when are you so scared of drugs? You still smoke pot sometimes, right? Why does that seem perfectly normal to you, but opium freaks you out? Is it because it’s the drug that all those scary Middle Easterners use?”

“That has nothing to do with it and you know it.”

“Whatever. I don’t know about you, but I’m going to smoke opium if Pedar-jan offers it to me. I’ve heard that it’s an amazing high. One puff, and your heart is filled with warmth and love. They say it’s like dreaming when you’re awake.”

Now the perfume of the opium sweeps across the balcony on the night breeze, and Roya remembers it distinctly—it is a delicious aroma, pure and organic, like leather or aged wood. Even without smoking she can feel the drug’s mesmerizing effect. Her eyes roam over the scene on the balcony, where the *araq* glasses reflect the red light from the *manqal* over and over, creating a kind of kaleidoscope. Beyond the balcony, the stars glint in their spheres, and she thinks she sees a few of them falling through the sky before her eyes.

After taking a deep hit from his pipe, Pedar-jan closes his eyes and falls into a brief opium-induced sleep. When he opens his eyes again he looks directly at Andrew and motions to him, summoning him toward the *manqal*.

Bee-ya, And-e-roo-joon, Pedar-jan says. “Come, Andrew.”

Andrew glances at Roya and smiles, then gets up and seats himself cross-legged on the carpet beside the old man.

Pedar-jan warms the pipe over the charcoal, then lifts it toward Andrew’s lips. Roya knows that the gesture is full of meaning—it signals her grandfather’s acceptance of her American husband. Pedar-jan continues to cradle the pipe while Andrew inhales, keeping the

charcoal balanced just above the piece of opium. Andrew holds the smoke inside his lungs for a long time before he lets it out again in a thick and steady stream. He does not cough.

“*Barak’Allah*,” Pedar-jan says, and Roya translates, “Good. You learn quickly.”

Andrew’s eyelids drop closed and he leans back against the cushions. Pedar-jan lets him rest for a moment, then rouses him gently with a touch on the shoulder and pours him a glass of tea from the teapot sitting on the *manqal*.

“Roya-joon, tell him that he must now drink this cup of tea with a lot of sugar. Otherwise he might feel nausea.” Roya translates, and Andrew accepts the tea.

Then it is Roya’s turn to smoke. This is her initiation—the ceremony that marks her passage into adulthood in her grandfather’s eyes. She must be graceful. She sits on the carpet next to Pedar-jan and he places the pipe against her lips. She inhales deeply, bending up all her energy to the feeling of the opium coursing through her body. As soon as it enters her bloodstream her eyelids, too, drop closed against her will. When she opens them again she cannot calculate how long they have been closed—it could be a few minutes or a full hour.

Roya has smoked pot many times, and she knows what it feels like to be stoned. This sensation is nothing like that one. Being stoned implies that the body turns to stone while the mind travels elsewhere—but this feels like a surrender of her body to sensory experience, as though every single atom of her physical self were being massaged and caressed.

A hush falls over the balcony—or perhaps it is the effect of the opium that makes it seem that way. The moths continue their suicide missions, but now when Roya looks at them, they seem to be traveling in slow motion and their buzzing is barely audible.

Suddenly the silence is broken by the sound of Pedar-jan clearing his throat, and Roya is jolted to attention. She remembers this sound: her grandfather, a master storyteller, always clears his throat this way before he begins a story. It is obvious that tonight’s story is going to be told especially for Andrew, because Pedar-jan looks directly at him and says, “I want to tell you about a strange thing that happened a few years ago here at the *bagh*.”

Once again Roya forgets for an instant that Andrew cannot understand Farsi, and that the two men do not have a language in common. But then Pedar-jan pauses and turns toward her. He is waiting for her to translate.

Andrew sits up now with his back against the cushion so that he can pay closer attention. Even though it is Roya’s voice he needs to listen to, it is the old man he looks at. And so the story floats across the night sky, circling from Roya’s grandfather through Roya herself, then continuing its arc toward her husband.



“One day, out of the blue, Mustafa brought a baboon to us,” Pedar-jan begins. “It had been given to him as a gift by his brother, who had purchased the animal from a beggar for 2,000 toumans at the warfront near Iraq. He brought it here on the bus, in a crate tied up with rope. I don’t know why Mustafa thought we would want the creature—I guess he thought it would impress me that he had gotten his hands on something so exotic.

“At first we thought it would be good fun to have the baboon. Farideh even sewed a suit of clothes for it, thinking that it could be an amusing pet. But it was not a docile animal—far from it. It arrived here in an agitated, almost crazed state. As soon as the crate was opened, the animal sprang forward, hissing and clawing. It ran straight toward the orchard and climbed a tree, and there it stayed. For the first few weeks, it seemed to be adjusting well. We would spot it from the balcony, sometimes far away and sometimes nearby. On occasion when we walked

through the orchards, we would see it huddled over the fruit that had fallen to the ground, jealously guarding its meal. We were a little bit frightened by the way it appeared and disappeared, but it kept to itself and seemed completely uninterested in us.”

Pedar-jan pauses to load the opium pipe again, and Farideh holds the tongs for him while he takes several hits. He sits in silence for a few moments and gazes into the *manqal*. Then he looks up at Andrew with an expression that is a mixture of curiosity and amusement. A half-smile is playing about the corners of his mouth, but his eyebrows are lifted in a way that suggests seriousness. He clears his throat again, and continues.

“As time went by, we would see the baboon less and less—only an occasional glimpse of its body jumping from tree to tree. But after a few weeks, the creature began to show up more frequently. Once when we were having our tea on the balcony, it suddenly appeared over the railing, baring its teeth and demanding attention. We were shocked and frightened, and we all ran inside the house. I came back a few minutes later with a heaping plate of food—dried bread crusts, apples, leftover rice, whatever I could find. The animal promptly devoured my offering before it leapt over the balcony again and disappeared.”

Pedar-jan stops speaking abruptly and reaches again for the opium pipe. He motions for Andrew to come forward again and extends the pipe in his direction. Roya can hear the opium bubbling on the pipe and the sound of Andrew’s breathing as he inhales the smoke. The night itself seems to be paused as the opium works its ancient spell on her husband. Everyone else remains silent, as if in suspended animation, until the old man moves the pipe away from Andrew’s lips and sets it back down on the rim of the *manqal*. He stirs the coals, buries them in the white ash to keep them burning, and resumes the story.

Roya translates as accurately as she can while her grandfather describes the baboon’s repeated acts of violence in the *bagh*, and the terror they had felt knowing that the creature was just outside their window when they fell asleep at night. On one occasion the baboon had suddenly appeared over the side of the balcony while they were eating dinner, leapt up on the table, and stolen food. On another occasion it had lunged at Farideh while she was in the garden and had bitten her in the leg, drawing blood.

The story he is telling is far from amusing, but throughout Pedar-jan’s narrative there is a touch of glee on his face. Andrew remains riveted. During one of Pedar-jan’s many pauses, Roya notices that Andrew has finished his drink, and she seizes the moment to stand up, retrieve the *araq* bottle from the tray, and refill both their glasses. Andrew lifts his glass toward her in a gesture of gratitude as the old man continues.

“After Farideh was bitten, I called Mustafa and ordered him to find the animal and chain it up. The workers were summoned to search for the baboon, and finally, after several days, they managed to do so. They put a collar around it and chained it to a tree in the courtyard near where the Afghani gardener and his family were living. We felt much more secure knowing that it was confined. As for the baboon, it seemed temporarily resigned to its fate, and even seemed repentant. For several weeks, it remained serene, calmly accepting the food that the workers took to it. We almost began to feel sorry for the poor creature, and even considered letting it go again.

“Then one day, Mustafa called me to tell me that the baboon had bitten the gardener’s five-year-old son. When I got to the courtyard where the animal was chained up, I found the child in a corner, crumpled in a heap. His arms were crossed over his stomach and he was trying to stanch the blood that flowed from a spot on his abdomen, seeping through his shirt. The baboon was crouched in the other corner of the courtyard, emitting vicious growls. As we approached the child, the baboon sprang up and hurled his own body against the courtyard

wall. I knew right then and there that it had to be done away with. If I'd had a weapon with me, I would have killed the creature myself."

Andrew now straightens up and leans toward Pedar-jan with rapt attention. In the brief lull that occurs before he begins speaking again, Roya glances back and forth from her grandfather to her husband, but neither man notices her. They are staring at one another. Pedar-jan's expression seems to contain a challenge, and Andrew looks a bit alarmed.

"I summoned Mustafa and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he had to kill the baboon. The workers assembled in the courtyard, where they threw a gunny sack over the beast, tied it tightly, and beat the sack ferociously with sticks until it was stained with blood and the animal was silent. Then they brought the bloody sack to the entrance of the house and left it there. I thanked the workers and went inside the house to decide how to dispose of the body. Even though the sack was still, I couldn't help feeling apprehensive as I stared at it. I was afraid to be alone with the creature, even though I knew it was dead. I walked past the sack toward the men who were now at some distance away, and called them back again. When we returned, the sack was empty. The workers were gathered again to hunt for the monster, and this time they brought out their sheep dogs to track it down. After several terror-filled days when the baboon failed to appear again, we convinced ourselves that it had found a quiet spot in the *bagh* and had gone there to die."

The story hangs in the air while Pedar-jan fills his pipe and smokes again. When his voice starts up again, his lilting Farsi sounds suddenly like music, and Roya senses that she was no longer a translator, but some kind of medium. The words Andrew is absorbing are coming to him without her intervention, directly from Pedar-jan himself.

"We were just beginning to forget about the animal's existence when Mustafa appeared one afternoon with its dead body in his arms. The baboon had been hiding in the stables, and had surprised him there that morning. Mustafa had seized a shovel and had beaten it until it was lifeless. He placed the body on the ground at my feet. I am ashamed to admit that I still feared the creature, which now seemed to me to be something from another world, capable of eluding death. I ordered the men to build a box to bury the creature in. They came back an hour later with a coffin-shaped box made of wood. I watched in fascination as they placed the baboon inside it, nailed the coffin shut, and put it in the back of the jeep. They later told me that they had placed the coffin inside of a dry well and had covered it with heavy stones. This time even the devil himself would not have been able to escape."

The story now appears to be over, and Pedar-jan and Roya stop talking almost in unison. Andrew is staring at Pedar-jan, open-mouthed, and Roya can't tell if he is shocked, frightened, or confused. He looks at her, then back at the old man.

"What an incredible story!" Andrew says this in English, not to Roya but to Pedar-jan. Pedar-jan stares at Andrew and chuckles softly.

Saabr-kon. Dastaan tamaam na-shod.

Roya does not need to translate because her husband has understood the Farsi: "Be patient. The story is not finished."

Andrew straightens up in anticipation of the real ending, but instead of continuing the story Pedar-jan reaches over to the radio that is sitting on the floor beside him and turns it on.

"It's time for the Farsi news on Voice of America."

Roya doesn't bother to translate these words because she knows that the radio is just her grandfather's way of tormenting Andrew. She is not sure what game her grandfather is playing, but she thinks this is his way of ridiculing the notion that Iranians need American propaganda in order to understand what is going on in their own country. He fiddles with the dials for a few minutes, but the signal is weak and scratchy so he switches the radio off. He

picks up the pipe again and takes a few puffs. Then he turns toward Andrew, gives him a sardonic smile, and speaks again.

“Maybe the animal was the devil. The next morning, the box was lying, splintered and empty, at the edge of the well. The baboon, of course, was nowhere to be seen. I don’t know whether it had escaped on its own, or whether some villager had heard its squeals and had set it free. But it had disappeared again, this time into the village. For several weeks, the animal was spotted repeatedly, sometimes in one neighboring village and sometimes in another. I called Mustafa to me again and told him that it was his duty to let the villagers know the baboon was dangerous, and that they had to pull together to eliminate it. I don’t know how they did it, but they managed to catch the creature again. This time they shot it with my hunting rifle, a direct shot in the temple.”

This time when Pedar-jan stops speaking, Andrew does not react. Pedar-jan looks straight at him and fixes him in a stare, then utters the final line of the story—a line that Roya can find no way to soften.

“Then Mustafa beheaded the horrible creature. Or so I am told. I did not want to watch the execution.”

A silence falls around Pedar-jan that is deep and palpable. For a few seconds, it seems as if the earth itself has stopped spinning.

Roya looks at the smile that is flickering across her grandfather’s face. It is a smile she recognizes. One summer when she had returned to Iran with a Barbie doll, her grandfather had picked the doll up and examined it with fascination. At first Barbie had looked fragile in Pedar-jan’s huge hands, and Roya’s first impulse had been to seize her doll from him to protect her. But then she looked at Barbie again and noticed her breasts, seemingly for the first time. It astonished her that she had not paid attention to the breasts before, and she was embarrassed to think that her grandfather had noticed them too. The doll suddenly looked obscene.

Pedar-jan turned Barbie over in his hands a few times, then smiled at Roya the same way he was now smiling at Andrew.

“I see that she is a woman,” he said with a chortle. “I know she is from California, but here in Iran she must wear a *hejab*.”

He picked up a napkin from the table and wrapped it around Barbie’s head.

“Now she is Khaleh-Roghieh,” he said. This was the name of the snaggle-toothed villager who baked their bread, a woman Roya had always been a bit frightened of.

Somewhere inside her Roya had known that Pedar-jan was teasing her and that his teasing was laced with love. But this was the moment when she had first recognized her grandfather’s ability to use a playful story the way others might use a knife. Although he was bitterly opposed to the mullahs who had seized power in Iran, giving her Barbie a *hejab* and an Iranian name was his way of telling her that he didn’t accept American domination either.

She can’t formulate the exact message that her grandfather has delivered to her husband with the story about the baboon, but she knows it has something to do with the assumptions Pedar-jan thinks Andrew is making about Iran. In her mind, she conjures an image of the Muslims as they are depicted in the nightly news she and Andrew watch from their living room in California: a dark mass of vicious animals who revel in violence and who must be contained. This image is immediately followed in her mind by a scene of human carnage; the aftermath of a drone strike on a nameless village.

She wants to speak up and tell her grandfather that he is wrong; that Andrew does not buy into media stereotypes and does not support American imperialism. But when she looks at her husband and sees the dazed expression that is frozen on his face after hearing her grandfather’s story, she isn’t so sure. For an instant, Andrew’s physical appearance almost

repulses her. His skin looks pallid, as though it were devoid of pigment. His hair has shaken loose and now looks scraggly, and his movements are awkward and vulgar as he lifts the glass of *araq* to his lips and swigs it all down at once. She hopes he will not speak because she does not want to hear his voice—not here, not now, not on this balcony.

A moth lands on Andrew's shoulder, and Pedar-jan reaches over and brushes it off.



After they are all in bed, the generator goes off, the moths disappear, and the *bagh* is once again enveloped in deep night. From the window of the bedroom where she and Andrew lie huddled together under a quilt, Roya can make out whole constellations of stars. The opium is still tingling in her veins, and she is alive with sensations. Just as she is beginning to give herself over to them, Andrew turns toward her and props himself up on his elbows.

“So, obviously, that story wasn't true, right?”

“How should I know? I didn't live here when it happened, remember?” She is surprised by the sharpness she hears in her own tone.

“I mean, your grandfather seems like a bit of a jokester,” Andrew says. “I think he might have been pulling my leg.”

“Stop overthinking it, Andrew,” Roya replies. “It's just a story.”

She turns away from him toward the wall, and they lie in silence for a while. Roya waits for the soft chuffing sound that Andrew always makes when he sleeps, but it does not come. He reaches for her shoulders in the dark, eases her over, and pulls her toward his chest. His body, which she knows is muscular and firm, suddenly seems to be made of rubber, and his voice now sounds nasal and thin. She wonders if the opium is distorting her sense perceptions.

“Hey, what do you think about making a baby tonight? Wouldn't it be cool to conceive a child here in Pedar-jan's house?”

He tries his best to pronounce the name correctly, but he fails to roll the 'r' and the 'a' sounds came out dull and flat; decidedly American. Roya stiffens. She had been ready for the opium initiation, but she is not ready to have sex in her family's *bagh*, in the bed she slept in as a child, with a man who can't pronounce her grandfather's name.

“No, Andrew, it wouldn't be cool at all. Let's just go to sleep.”

“Okay, *azizam*,” Andrew says, once again badly mangling the Farsi despite his best efforts to pronounce it carefully. Roya can't make out his face in the dark, but she can hear the gaiety in his voice. This is all great fun to him.

He kisses her softly on the cheek, and even when she turns her back to him again he continues to hold her tightly. She tries to relax her body against his, but she is more focused on the stars beyond the window. At first they seem distant, but after she stares at them for a while she begins to feel herself swimming among them, far away from her husband.

Soon the chuffing comes. Roya tunes it out, and instead listens to the sounds of the night: the whirl of bat's wings, the distant song of owls and bulbuls, the soft whoosh of the wind brushing against the trees. Then come the smells. A faint odor of opium is still lingering in the air, but now there are other aromas she has not noticed before: the smell of the desert dust lifting in the night breeze, the sweet perfume of the ripening cherries and grapes from the orchard below, the pungent odor of fresh sheep droppings from the mountains miles away.

As she closes her eyes and surrenders her body to sleep, she sees the face of her grandfather silhouetted against the stars and replays the sound of his ancient voice, telling a story that she knows was not entirely true.