

Stealthy Freedom

EACH day before she leaves her home, Saghi drapes herself in flowing sheets of cotton and muslin and silk. She does so with an artist's eye, knowing how the folds will fall along her shoulders, where to tie the knot so it will reveal a suggestive triangle of flesh at the base of her neck, how the fabric will form an arrow down her back that will point straight to her hips and sway with them as she walks. She knows what colors and patterns best complement her complexion, and she knows how to arrange the fabric around her face so that her best features—high cheekbones, full lips, arched eyebrows—will spring arrestingly to life. Always there is some hair showing, and this, too, is strategic. A few wispy strands must be loosened from beneath the top line of the headscarf, just enough to suggest the luscious tresses that lie beneath. The daily process of draping herself in fabric has given her an intimate relationship with her body.

Today she takes special pleasure in her preparations. After she emerges from the shower, she pats herself dry and rubs a generous coating of rosewater over her skin. Then she stands before the mirror and admires herself, marveling at her slim waistline, the bulge of her hips, the delicate curve of her breasts. She watches herself in the mirror as she snaps on her bra, slips on her panties, and slides nylon stockings over her slender legs. She selects a silky, tight-fitting blouse from her closet and watches herself do up each snap, beginning with the bottom one and making her way up to the snap that rests right below her cleavage. She will remain in her blouse and stockings until just before leaving, when she will perform the final stage: the act of draping herself.

Wearing makeup in public is usually not wise, as the Guidance Patrols have become more ubiquitous lately, lurking on street corners and pulling

women aside to arrest them, or at the very least shame them, for hijab violations. But makeup is essential today, and she delights in her own shrewdness as she applies it. She doesn't need foundation for her flawless skin, but she paints her eyelids like a canvas, applying a soft arc of copper-colored eyeshadow, a thin line of kohl, a gentle brushing with mascara to accentuate her lashes. She will keep her sunglasses on until the critical moment arrives. The bright red lipstick, which the Guidance Patrols refer to as "martyr's blood," cannot be applied until later. It will go into her purse until it is time to put it on.

Next she turns her attention to her hair, a thick mane of ebony that falls just below her shoulders. She cannot wear it loose, because this will lessen the effect of what she is about to do, and the fashionable high ponytail she usually wears beneath her hijab also won't be practical today. She opts for a large butterfly clip. Holding it in one hand, she gathers up her hair in the other and snaps the clip into place.

Saghi has been wearing a headscarf since the age of nine, so putting one on before she leaves home is as natural to her as putting on shoes. Removing it is equally natural for her; she does so with one swift movement as soon as she crosses the threshold and is safely away from the eyes of the authorities. Today, though, the removal of her headscarf will be a willful act of defiance, so it must carry weight. She must remove it in a manner that is ceremonious, unrepentant, combative. She is aware that the action will come with great risk. Other women have been caught while performing the action and accused of what the government calls "the crime of corruption and prostitution." Some have suffered grave consequences: arrest and interrogation, lashes, decades-long sentences in Evin Prison. Her pulse quickens as she considers these consequences now, but she is resolved. She sits down on the bed to await the phone call.

Paradoxically, the ritual of draping herself always makes Saghi feel proud to be a woman. She knows many kinds of women in the Islamic Republic, and they fill her with admiration. There are women who wield tremendous power and whose husbands cower before them. Women who appear docile, but who defy their given roles in subtle but vital ways. Women who have tasted just enough freedom to whet their appetites for more. Women whose lives were thrown off course by a government they did not choose, who adapted and learned to curl their existence around injustice, who kept growing and thriving even when the cards were stacked against them. Women who uphold tradition and women

who fly in its face. Women who languish in prison for speaking their minds and women who stand outside the prison gates and raise their fists for justice. All these women must drape themselves in fabric, and each does so with her own subtle motives in mind.

She is aware that women in the Western world are speaking out against the men who abuse them, and she is happy for these women. They are her sisters. But they did not grow up, as she did, in the birthplace of miniature painting, so they fail to recognize that the true picture is often hidden in the fine details. They paint the women who drape themselves the way a child might paint them, with simple, clumsy brushstrokes, giving them all the same face of resignation and the same shapeless garment that hides their shoulders, hips, and breasts—even their hands and feet. They don't understand that the abuse these women face does not begin and end with their hijab. It is deeper, more tangled, and more insidious. Simple words like "me too" are not strong enough weapons for Saghi and her draped sisters.

Her parents made a provocative choice when they named her Saghi, and the audacity of her name has always gratified her. It is a name that raises eyebrows because it harkens back to an earlier time, a time that is now seen as sinful and toxic. The name was taken from the *saghi* who appear frequently in the ghazals of Hafez, the great Sufi poet and mystic. On the surface the word denotes female wine-servers, but Hafez's *saghi* were far more than mere women. They were vehicles of truth—women whose seductive femininity put men in a trance that led them to god. The god in the ghazals of Hafez is not the Allah of the filthy bearded men who run the country, but a higher, airier kind of god. The older she gets, the more Saghi strives to be worthy of her lusty, life-affirming name.

She is thankful to have been raised by parents who bequeathed their pre-revolutionary culture to her—parents who still read poetry, drink alcohol, and believe in dancing and music and sex. Thanks to them, and to the internet, she grew up listening to female singing voices, forbidden now unless they are performing for female audiences or blended with male voices in a chorus. Saghi has been told that she possesses a heavenly voice, and she sings often: in the shower, at family gatherings, at the parties she sometimes attends. If she could sing when she walked down the street draped in fabric, she would mesmerize men like a siren.

Today it is not her singing voice she will use to assert her power. Instead, she will use the strongest weapon she possesses, which also happens to be the very symbol of her oppression.

The phone call comes promptly at 10:00 AM, as planned. Saghi does not really know Neguin, the woman on the other end of the line. She has only met her once, briefly, on a street in front of Azad University, where they are both students. The meeting between them was arranged by a mutual friend, and as soon as Saghi laid eyes on Neguin, she felt a spark of kinship. Roughly Saghi's own height and build and draped in similar fabric, Neguin might have been mistaken for her twin if the two of them were seen from a distance. But when she heard Neguin voice her opinions without fear and watched her toss her head back in genuine laughter, Saghi knew that this woman had ascended to a higher plane of self-realization. It fills her with glee to imagine her male professors struggling to keep their composure when confronted with classrooms full of women like Neguin.

Now Neguin is on the other end of her cell phone, and Saghi's heart thumps as she pushes the button to answer the call. After a brief exchange of greetings, Neguin goes straight to the matter at hand. "Are you going to be ready today?" she asks.

"Yes, of course!" Saghi replies. "But you haven't told me where I am going."

"Do you know Laleh Park?"

"Yes, I do. What time should I be there?"

"We are aiming for the early afternoon. It is safest right after the shops and offices close for the afternoon. There will still be people in the park and on the streets, but the guards and patrols will be on their break. Can you make it at 2:30?"

"Absolutely. I will be there."

"Good! Don't fail us!"

Saghi cannot be sure she won't fail in the mission, but she sputters, "I won't!" and ends the call.

The time has come for the final stage of the draping process; the stage that immediately precedes her exit from the house. She keeps an assortment of roopooshes beside the front door: a summer roopoosh made of flouncy cotton, a form-fitting roopoosh in daring colors, a boutique roopoosh with a fashion-

able cut that falls just above the knee. Today she chooses the most comfortable and least conspicuous roopoosh she has, a simple beige one with tortoise-shell buttons down the front. She knows right away which headscarf she will wear with it: the large gauzy one with a leopard-skin print. Watching herself in the full-length mirror in the hallway, she billows the scarf out over her head, wraps it around her neck once, then tosses the loose right end over her left shoulder. She picks up the small purse in which she has placed her cell phone, her wallet, and the tube of red lipstick, and settles it across her torso. One last head-to-toe inspection of herself in the hallway mirror, and she steps outside.

When Saghi leaves her home on an ordinary day, whether for work or school or shopping, she goes forth with her chin held high and her shoulders straight. She has heard that in the days before the revolution, when her mother was her age, women were subjected to brazen wolf-whistles and catcalls when they walked down the street. In the Islamic Republic it is considered vulgar for men to reveal their baser urges, so they have learned to restrain the animals that live inside them. It amuses Saghi when she feels their furtive eyes straining to follow her movements, to take in as much of her as possible in their peripheral vision. Their suppressed reactions, the combination of fear and awe that her approach inspires, sometimes gives her a rush of power. But the stakes are high today, and she can't be certain what kinds of feelings she will provoke.

The air in Tehran is usually thick and fetid, but today a clear blue expanse stretches above her as she makes her way toward the bus stop. The bus is crowded, but bus riders in the city are used to minding their own business, and no one pays attention to her when she boards. With her dull roopoosh and her makeup hidden behind sunglasses, she is just another woman on a bus—an office worker, a daughter, a young wife.

She sits down in an aisle seat, leaving the window seat beside her empty. It is the only empty seat left on the bus, and when a man gets on a few stops later, she stands to allow him to slide into the window seat so she won't have to climb over him to get out. The man does not seem interested in her at first, but after a few minutes he turns to her and speaks. "I take this bus every day at this hour," he says, "but I have never seen you before. Where are you going, sister? You can't be shopping, since all the stores are closed until this evening."

It irks Saghi when men she doesn't know call her "sister," but she doesn't allow her voice to betray her annoyance. "My aunt lives near Laleh Park. How many stops are left before that one?" As soon as the question leaves her mouth,

she realizes her mistake. “She just moved here from Isfahan,” she adds. “It’s my first time visiting her.”

“Three more stops,” the man says. Saghi thinks she sees playful suspicion on his face, but when he turns away from her and looks out the window, she knows she is safe. He nudges her arm and says “next one” when her stop is approaching, and they exchange a friendly smile as she gets up to exit.

Laleh Park is located in a bustling downtown district, an incongruous spot of green in the otherwise grimy city center. Saghi remembers coming here on a few occasions as a child, and although she has not been back in years, she has a sudden visual memory of the park’s layout. She heads toward the middle of the park where she knows there is a large fountain, expecting to find people congregated there. But the area is not the way she remembers it. On either side of the fountain there are people hurrying home for the afternoon rest period: older women struggling with heavy shopping bags, mothers pulling children by the hand to get them to walk faster, men with their heads down, puffing on cigarettes. A few bloated city pigeons, their feathers the color of soot, look up at her indifferently for a moment, then continue pecking at debris in the grass. She must find a better spot.

She remembers that the park has a large playground, and she turns in that direction. A group of children are crouched down in the dirt beneath the slide, playing a game with stones, and as she draws closer she notices that a few of them are girls. They are wearing headscarves, so she takes their ages to be above nine, the age at which the hijab becomes mandatory. The children do not seem to notice her presence, or if they do, they think nothing of it.

Over to one side of the playground there is a cluster of park benches. She surveys the people sitting on them: mothers and fathers watching their children, youths on their cell phones, elderly couples out for a stroll, workers pausing to rest before they continue their path toward home. Beyond the benches there is a stone walkway lined with cedar trees, and two young mothers are pushing their children in strollers along it. On the far side of the path she can spot the street that runs along this end of the park. Pedestrians are walking with purpose down the sidewalks, and cars and motorcycles zigzag down the center of the street, their nasal horns drowning out the laughter of the children on the playground.

She is debating whether to sit down on a park bench, remain standing, or continue walking toward the street, when her cell phone rings. Neguin skips the greeting this time, and just asks, “How does it look?”

Saghi isn't sure she understands the question, so she responds with a question of her own: "How is it supposed to look?"

"Count how many people you can see."

Saghi looks around her and does a quick inventory of the playground area, the park benches, the people on the stone walkway, and the pedestrians on the adjacent street. "About twenty or twenty-five," she says.

"Men or women?"

"Both. And a few children."

"Children are no problem! Children are great! But I hope there are at least that many people when the right moment comes. Fewer than twenty would be a shame."

At the mention of "the right moment," Saghi's heart begins to quicken. She covers her nervousness by blurting out another question. "Is everyone else ready?"

"Neda is ready, and so is Ameneh. They are in touch with the others, and they're all standing by. I'm waiting to hear from Soussan. She had to walk, because the bus line to her spot wasn't running today. Her spot is Tabiat Bridge, so it is crucial that she be there."

Saghi knows Tabiat Bridge well. It is the largest pedestrian bridge in Tehran, spanning a wide highway and connecting two of the city's most frequented parks. The bridge is full of people all day long, even during the high heat of naptime. She is astonished that anyone would have the courage to select that spot. "Isn't that dangerous?" she asks.

"Yes, of course it is!" Neguin scoffs. "But Tabiat Bridge is an important symbol, because it was designed by a woman. Did you know that?"

Saghi can't bring herself to lie. "I didn't, actually," she says. "But I did know that the design was inspired by a tree, which is why it has that huge post in the middle that looks like a trunk with branches." As soon as she utters this sentence, she realizes it is trivial and irrelevant. This is not the time for small talk.

Negin remains silent for a few moments, then says, "Oh! I think this is Soussan calling now! That means everyone is ready to go. All you have to do is find the right spot and wait for the signal. Remember, you're all going to do this at around the same time, and I'm going to gather all the photos and videoclips and post them together, like a huge flood."

Now Saghi's heart is thumping so hard that she can feel it in her throat and her temples. A boy from the playground looks up at her, and she wonders

for a moment if he can hear her heartbeat. Realizing how foolish this thought is, she gives him a broad smile, and he smiles back.

What is the right spot? How can she tell? She thinks back on the videos she has seen of women in Tabriz, Abadan, Isfahan, Shiraz, even the holy city of Qom. The video of a stunning beauty, no more than sixteen years old, who strides into the middle of a subway car and shouts, “Look at us, women of the West! Are you impressed?” The video of two women who stand together in the center of Azadi Square, under the famous monument, and scream, “*Azadi* means freedom, and this is my freedom!” The video of an older woman, probably in her sixties, who walks up the front steps of the Parliament building, turns toward the street, and shouts, “They got Fereshteh, and Pari became her voice. They got Pari, and Simin became her voice. They got Simin, and Mojgan became her voice. They got Mojgan, and I have become her voice.”

These women had made careful choices of the general locales they would go to, but at the last moment they had resorted to instinct when choosing the exact spots in which to perform the action. She mustn't overthink. Instead, she must calm her beating heart and try her best to be natural.

She crosses through the playground in the direction of the street, and as she does so, she lifts the lipstick from her purse and streaks it across her lips. She drops the tube back into her purse, removes her sunglasses and drops them in there too, then retrieves her cell phone. She isn't practiced at filming herself, but the quality of the video is not important. It is the subject matter—the action itself—that counts.

The signal comes just as she is passing in front of a park bench full of men. Without pausing to think, she reaches up and with a single, deft motion pulls her headscarf down around her shoulders and frees her hair from the butterfly clip. The clip falls to the ground, and she leaves it there. She points her cell phone camera at her made-up face, at her full red lips, at her hair. She can't feel a breeze, so she shakes her head from side to side to show the full effect of her loose hair. Still training the cell phone on herself, she uses her free hand to unbutton her roopoosh, points the camera at her upper body, and films her tight-fitting blouse. Just as she is about to film her hair again, a breeze starts up, as if on cue. She lifts the scarf from her shoulders and holds it aloft until it catches the wind, then lets it go, filming it as it rises toward the treetops. Then she points the camera back at her face, films her gleeful smile, and pushes the red button at the bottom of her screen. She quickly dials Nequin on WhatsApp and sends the clip over to her.

A few meters away on the playground, a child gives a frightened cry and begins running toward the park benches. Saghi freezes for a moment, but then she notices that the other children are looking up at her with wonder and expectation on their faces. One of them, a girl of about ten who is wearing a school-issued hijab, begins clapping. Slowly, hesitantly, a few other children join in. She turns the cell phone toward the playground, films the children, and sends the clip to Neguin.

Now, suddenly, the people on either side of the playground are in motion. She was wrong—there are far more than twenty people here. She is surrounded by them, and she has the sudden awareness that they are closing in on her, not to harm her, but to protect her. Some begin clapping, and others point their cell phones in her direction to film her. Before long, the roar of clapping hands is all around her: it is coming from the playground, from the cluster of benches, from the stone walkway, even from the street. It occurs to her that this is the first time in her life she has received applause from perfect strangers. Emboldened now, she shouts, “Post this on Instagram! Post it on Facebook! Send it to everyone you know!”

She spins around toward the people who are now surrounding her and points her phone at the constellation of faces. She is not sure what she is filming, but it doesn't matter because everyone around her seems to be filming. The moment will be eternalized.

From one side of the playground, a man is striding angrily in her direction. She has anticipated this, and she has thought about how she will respond: she will not back away from him, but instead stand stock still, as if she were confronting a wild bear. She will fix her eyes on his and challenge him with her glare. She will give him a derisive smile, perhaps even laugh out loud in his face. If he thinks she is being immoral or trying to seduce him, that will be the work of his imagination—and she will tell him so.

Now he begins to storm toward her, waving an object in her direction. At first she thinks it might be a weapon, but then she realizes it is just a stick he has picked up from the ground. When he is a few feet away from her, he thrusts the stick in her direction and snarls, “Kessaffat! Filth!”

Saghi has been given no precise script for this situation, but she doesn't need one. She turns her cell phone around and points it at the man, zooming in on his brutish face. “Why are you looking?” she asks defiantly. “Who gave you permission to look?” She moves the cell phone closer to him, so close that it is almost touching him. “You are the one . . . you've got a problem!” She

steps toward him until she is close enough for him to see her makeup, smell her perfume, feel her breath. “You are the one who is kessaffat!” she screams. “Men are not supposed to ogle women, didn’t you know that? And if you’re aroused by my hair, I think you’ve got a problem!”

The crowd has now gathered around her in a huddle, and they raise their voices to jeer at the man. “Boro gom sho! Boro pey-karet! Get lost! Mind your own business!” He begins to back away, shouting at her as he retreats, “There are laws in this country, you whore!”

“Yes, there are! Believe me, I know that! I am a victim of those laws every day! Let me remind you that there were laws about slavery too. That didn’t make it right.”

“Boro! Boro!” *Go! Go!* the crowd says in chorus, waving their arms in the man’s direction. He puts his hands up to his face to shield himself from the cell phones, then drops his head between his shoulders and slinks toward the edge of the park.

Even though she knows he can no longer hear her, Saghi shouts in his direction, her voice rising in pitch. “Go tell Khamenei! Tell him to find me and lock me up! Then you can live with the guilt of what those pigs will do to me!”

All around her, cell phones are glinting in the air. Some are filming her, some are filming the retreating man, some are panning around the area and filming the whole scene. The man is too far away from Saghi now for her to film him, so she turns her cell phone away from him and back toward her own face. What she says next is not meant for the man; it is for the whole world to hear. She reaches up with her free hand to tousle her hair, then moves it down along the side of her face and across her chest. “This is my hair!” she shrieks, her voice now ecstatic. “This is my face! This is my body! Mine!”

Startled by her own words, she pauses, saves the clip, and forwards it to Neguin. Less than a minute later, her phone begins to ding madly.