





The Arrival

I remember things differently. I realize this immediately. All of a sudden I am less hopeful. I am uncomfortable. Things feel a bit scarier and more real.

The wall of relatives greeting me has grown since the last time I was here. Mostly familiar and some unknown faces. Everyone always shows up at the airport. It seems to be the tradition here since there have been airports, and, of course, the obligatory fender bender in the parking lot. It's not a trip to Tehran if it doesn't begin with an uncle, two cars (someone else's uncle), and a screaming woman.

The ride home is long and I feel dizzy. It's so hot. The nausea sets in on top of

the fatigue. It takes days to get there. It takes days to settle in. I was much younger the last time—still a kid. I'm old enough now and traveling alone.

I know I needed to leave home for a bit. The assault was getting to be too much. It was closing in on me. The abuse at school was numbing. It was normalizing. It took a lot for me to realize that it was real and destructive. My brain needed a break. My feelings needed a break. My tear ducts needed a break. My heart needed a break. I went into survival mode but I couldn't defend myself. I had no arsenal. I didn't want to use what they did. I didn't want to hurt anyone. So, I left for what I have always thought of as home. I asked my parents if I could spend the whole summer in Iran. I wanted to be somewhere where

my identity would not be chipped away by uninformed pubescent rats. I wanted to feel that same safeness of being inside my house, protected from that darkness that grabs and chokes until the afternoon bell rings. I wanted to speak my language, hear my language, and feel a consistent familiarity I didn't at home. Home? It's a confusing word.



Terrorist this, Arab that, fuck Iran, you Ayatollah-loving fuck. It's as if I went to school at an anti-Iran rally, every day, for ten years. I really thought everyone around me was stupid. How can they think I am a terrorist? How can they think my father is a bad man? He's a doctor—he saves lives. My mother is

a beautiful artist. How can they think she would hurt anyone? If I were such an Ayatollah-loving camel jockey, then why the fuck would I live here? In your peaceful suburban nightmare? Did someone remove your brain while you were asleep? If I am such a terrorist, then why are you the one hurting me? You are hurting me. Oh, and just so you know, I am not an Arab. Just if you want to get your facts straight before the next punch. And another side note before that next insult lands in my ear: Neither I nor my country is the subject of your delightful Desert Storm. The many shades of brown come in handy when commenting on the various Middle East crises. It seems I am anything from Iranian to Iraqi, Afghani, or Arab. “Thankfully” my father drove a Mercedes. That was the cherry on

top of the Middle East desert-trolling, camel-riding, oil-producing ice cream fucking sundae. Believe me; it was even harsher than I am making it sound. No one believed me. Not even my parents. So, after a while, I kept quiet. I silenced it, internalized it, and waited it out. Waiting. Still, sometimes waiting. Sometimes I can forget about it and get on with the day, but eventually it creeps back into some unguarded crevice.



There is no better healing than the warm hands of a grandmother. Gently on my head. She is so much older all of a sudden, but still so powerful. She is more like The Godfather than a grandmother. People lining up to get

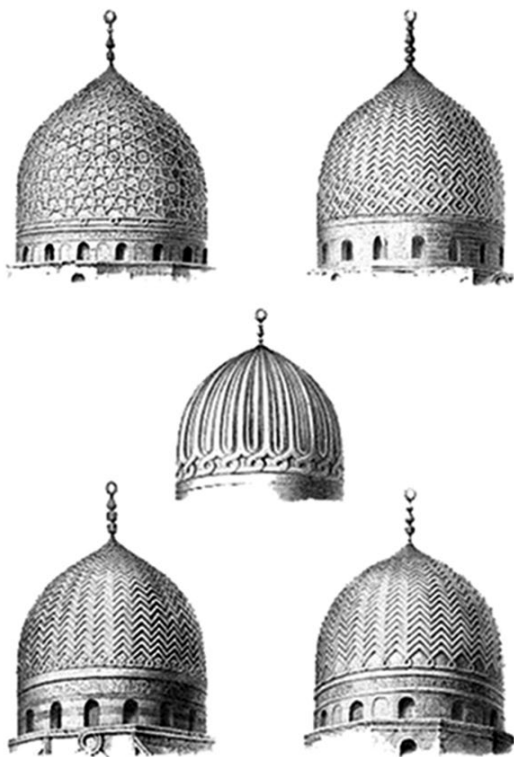
advice, a little money, a smack in the head. The wisdom pouring out of her eyes and mouth as if she had been alive for the whole three thousand years of Persian history, or all of humanity. Sitting cross-legged on an ornate rug, the tin box next to her filled with cash and candy. Her eyes and her hands full of love. Warm, caressing away the nausea from my body. Telling me the candy will cure me. Only a grandmother could get away with such a notion. She didn't care that I was older now. For a grandmother, fourteen or fifteen years are the same as four or five. She held me close until I was healed from the changes I was going through. She told me it was the weather, the humidity that made me feel ill, or that I was tired and jet-lagged. I listened and I drank

her potions and took her remedies. It always worked. Of course it did—she was my grandmother. She was a magician. I hoped she can help me figure out the theater of the absurd I was going through back at school. What could she tell me that would help me? She was so far away, in a place where everyone is the same. Could she have a potion to fix all of that?

Not sure that she does, but she did ask me if I am going to the funeral. Funeral? I just got here and there is a funeral? *You should go. It's good for you. You are a man now!* With that I felt her warm hands slowly slipping away. Was this the shift? Is the roof flying off of the shelter in the uncontrollable storm? Will her always calming and reassuring words that made me feel comfortable

as a child turn into sharp biting life
lessons? A man now? A funeral?





The Funeral

I am trying to understand exactly who it was. A distant cousin, a friend of the family, possibly—I am not sure. The lines get blurred sometimes. I was never really a big part of it. We were never around long enough for any bond to cure. Building a relationship from such a long distance was hard. Nevertheless, I am here now, at his funeral.

The cemetery is called *Behesht-e Zahra* or Zahra's heaven. An endless field of marble polished by the feet of mourners, the dried-up tears from their eyes, and that relentless, ruthless sun.

The heat was unbearable. Sharp and dry, diesel and dust. It meandered in the bright air. I tried to hold together

my stomach. The nausea was overwhelming, constant, and cruel. I am doing everything I can to stop from throwing up. Looking up at the sky to get a grip, some kind of calm. The sun was so bright. The silhouettes of domes and minarets piercing the sky. I'd look down and take a deep breath and realize there was only death beneath my feet. Think of a constant—something to get you to the other side. A sound. A song. Play it in my head. It brought things under control for a moment. You can't throw up at a funeral. That would be terrible.

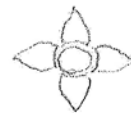
People were crying. Women were flailing their arms, asking the sky why. The men had their hands in their faces asking the same.

Occasionally they would find respite in seeing me. The embraces were tight and full of truth. They really did miss me. I knew so little of them but they seemed to know so much about me. I could taste their tears and smell their sweat. Their true sadness at the loss was seeping through my skin and heading toward my core. There is so much unfamiliarity in my head, from the temperature of the air to the primal grief being expelled from the sad people. I wasn't where I thought I was. What I hoped for wasn't here. Rows of men stood solemnly like columns. An ancient wailing stood for some kind of prayer sending the dead to the other side. The women featureless under their veils, only their whimpering could be heard. This place is amazing. It's so big. The sacred buildings in the distance.

Whites and blues. The prayers are in Arabic. I don't understand what they are saying. What they mean. I learned a few in school, my other school. Every Saturday for eight hours learning Farsi and Islam. Mostly ignoring the latter. I didn't need another element to be added to the mockeries. I didn't need to give them any more ammunition. Add that to the mix? Yeah, no thanks. I mean, I did try a little. I thought I could find shelter under the roof of religion at some point, but it turned dark, a bit sad and too alien from my usual surroundings.

The funeral ended. I couldn't wait to lay my head down and sleep off this awful feeling. I needed to settle into the weather and the time zone. As if on cue, a male cousin slapped me on

the shoulder and squeezed me toward him. A hug that should mean I had known this guy forever but I must say he simply looked familiar. He told me the men are going to the mosque and that I should go with them. I was not curious but I didn't want to offend. I just didn't want to stretch the parade of wailing into another chapter of the day, but of course, quiet little mousy me said sure and I went along. He told me to stay close and that he would keep an eye on me, hinting that this would not be a normal visit.



The mosque was beautiful. What a stunning building, dripping with turquoise and gold. A perfect shape.

Intricate and magical. The details, the tiles, and the perfect curves. Who was patient enough to paint every single tile and lay it down next to the last one, and then another, over and over again? Did this person ever think they would finish? It felt endless. The labor and the belief and the perfection. I thought if I could have that kind of patience I could survive my ordeal back home. Put my head down and imagine that this was just a dumb part of life I have to squeeze through to get to the other side. I thought that. No one reinforced it for me but I thought it still.

Inside was a different story. I am not sure why. Maybe we were in a specific part, clearly not beneath the dome. A small and dingy passageway—and

not dingy in an ancient, dark, damp, full-of-history way, but more like a banal generic government office. Dirty, pale yellow walls and big kegs of liquid. Everyone clamoring for what was inside it. Some diluted rosewater, then piles of shoes and the stink from them. That took my nausea to another dimension. I couldn't believe I held it together. How could this building be so majestic and awe-inspiring on the outside and contain so much stink and darkness on the inside?

We entered the next room. A cacophony of cries and slaps—it was some day of mourning (apart from the funeral I had just attended). The mourning of an imam (there are many). The mourners were self-flagellating, throwing belts over their

shoulders against bare backs. A full spectrum of believers was on display: some were chatting in the corners and some were full-blown believing, actually to the point of bleeding. The enormity of the sadness was almost impossible. I definitely looked the part of a confused nonbeliever. I couldn't hide the terror from my face. The men surrounding me could tell, and it wasn't because of my age. Kids younger than me were partaking in the ceremony. I gave off an air, for sure. I was not from around here. This was evident from the tips of my toes to my top of my head. I wasn't necessarily decked out in "American gear," but I wasn't dressed like a local, with my weird colorful short-sleeved shirt and slim pants. Nikes definitely weren't the average footwear traversing the streets

of Tehran. I was supposed to keep my arms covered. My uncles and cousins warned me that I could run into trouble, but assumed my age would allow me to get away with it. Let's just say I played the part of a tourist pretty well, although there was not much tourism at that time in Tehran, I assumed.

I was not fully aware of my "look"—the very specific "cousin from America" look. This would plague me every day for the rest of my trip. I guess you could tell from a mile away. I guess I couldn't shake it. I didn't try enough. Everything from my clothes to my hair and my imperfect speech. Here I am again. I am standing out! Really standing out. Maybe more than I stood out back at school. I am all the

way on the other side of the planet in
a place that's supposed to be familiar.
Not so much.





The Garden

Dinner was over. Everyone was stuffed with heaps and mounds of spiced rice and stews, breads, and herbs. Layers upon layers of fragrances permeated the air. There is no better food in the world. Every grain and every drop is full of pure love from a mother or grandmother or aunt, and when you are a child they just want to shove it into your body. They see no limit. *Eat! You are a growing boy! You didn't eat enough! Did you eat enough? Try this! You don't want to offend me, do you? Of course not! You certainly have more room for your grandmother's aash (soup).* And when you really couldn't eat more they bring out the fruit. Melons like custard, grapes like candy, and blackberries plucked straight from the

trees in our garden. *You don't have to be hungry to eat fruit!*

At this point every night my three uncles and the occasional friend would disappear into the garden. I was always curious what the MEN were doing. How long did I have to wait to cross that threshold? Childhood was dragging its weary worn feet. When could I disappear into the garden? I felt that I had already experienced my fair share of dark kid stuff—more like dark adult stuff really. Well, then why not let me cross early? At home I felt it would never happen. How could I have any chance to experience some kind of rite of passage when no one could even hear or see me?

Then, as if he had been lounging in a chair inside my head witnessing me

wallowing in my hopeless teen identity angst, the youngest of the three uncles grabbed the back of my neck in the most loving alpha-male way possible and took me along with them. A rush of pushback burst from the other side. All the women flailed their arms and shook their heads against what was inevitable—my rite of passage. The era of their sweet little boy was coming to an end, or at least the first step towards it.

We carried on to that mysterious spot in that magical garden where I so often spent my days playing as a young child. A wall of chatter and laughter behind us. My uncle looking back and smirking at the women, as if he was getting away with something.

With his arm around me, he said one

thing: *You can hang out with us; just keep it to yourself.*

And here we were.



There was a carpet laid out with three pillows, one for each uncle. Tea, a bottle of “something,” fruits and nuts, cigarettes, a tiny little grill, and the weirdest pipe I had ever seen. They told me to play and hang out. I didn’t have my own pillow. No seat at the table (carpet), but trusted enough to at least

be a part of the landscape. That was more than enough for me.

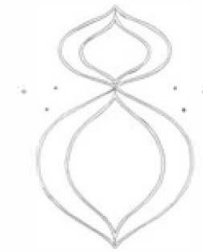
Like odd Bedouins, they lay on their sides on the ground wearing a strange combination of crisp dress shirts and loose pajama pants. The smoke billowing from their mouths and nostrils as if they were ancient dragons. Laughing and cackling. Talking about this, that, and whatever. I lay there and catch a word or two and take in a whiff of the smoke (it was not tobacco). Looking up at the trees and the fruits hanging from them like jewels. A huge calm overtook me, simply from being trusted. The sweet smell of mulberries hung in the air. Another word, another rumble of laughter, another cloud of smoke. Every once in a while they would look my way, making sure I was paying attention.

Listen, learn, and judge for yourself.
We trust you. And we are testing you.

I didn't know or could have cared less what they were doing. I knew they were doing adult things, but the details didn't matter. To me, it mattered that I was a trusted part of anything. I wore that badge for a long time. It was always something I could come back to, hold up to the sun, and keep in my pocket, like a real family heirloom.

I love thinking about this garden. It was sheltered by thick walls, yet open to the sky. Guarded from the moral police and peering judgmental eyes, but limitless when looking up at the expanse. The stars at night, the sun in the day. Birds flying in and out, taking

in nourishment. It was a safe but not claustrophobic. The city streets were a different story.





The Streets

The streets of Tehran are not unlike a fine wine. Full body, diesel fuel, with hints of jasmine, dust, a dollop of fruit if you are near a market, a waft of freshly baked bread, mulberries, and asphalt. The list goes on and on. The orchestra of sounds fills your mind—it is a cacophony at first, but then it settles into a hum of buzzing tiny engines with melodies of sirens and calls to prayer. The herds of people daring to cross the streets or jump over the rivers of wastewater unify it all with beat and rhythm. Dusty and hot and busy, but very specific and very special. When I was younger I could only be out with an adult. Mostly because the traffic was so treacherous. But now, after a few days of settling in, I got to

walk around and take in the city. Not too far, but just over to a cousin's house nearby. The bludgeoning heat didn't stop kids from playing in the small side streets. Kicking around a striped plastic ball, shouting and teasing each other. Hearing the language outside my family confines was weird but reassuring. This is what I was looking for. Walking around among my people, feeling protected by the familiar. My feet firmly on the land I stem from. The weight off my shoulders. I really sensed I could smell the camaraderie in the dusty air. Or so I thought.

I don't know what I could have done to look more Iranian. My clothes were my clothes. They were all I had. I didn't realize how different I looked. Or maybe I was walking with some

unbeknownst-to-me trepidation. A shyness that screamed out "He lives in America!" Was there a red, white, and blue bull's-eye somewhere on me I couldn't see? I guess they could just tell I was clueless. I know the tension is there, but I guess people are constantly looking for an enemy, especially kids puffing out their chests at one another.

A group of kids came at me out of nowhere. Your run-of-the-mill bully types: one leader, his lackey, and a bunch of little rats that egged them on. *Hey, where are you from? Not here, obviously.* The laughter erupted around the leader but he wasn't laughing. He was dead serious and extremely angry. *What are you doing here? Is it your holiday? Are we a part of your holiday? Do you get to go to Amrika after your*

little holiday, boy? Maybe you should go home to Amrika with a few bruises!
Well. What could I do? I couldn't tell if he was the Iranian who hated America and wanted me dead, or the one who wanted to go back with me to America. If only he knew what was in store for him there. I stood firm. Ha! No, I didn't. I ran. They wanted to beat the shit out of me and I wasn't in the mood. Running with all my strength, hopefully in the right direction, I made it in the nick of time. Out of breath and confused and sad to learn a new truth, I didn't know what to do, what to think. I have a new identity now. Add it to the collection. What is it? The American cousin? The traitor? I didn't choose any of this. Most of us don't, really. The choice is made for us, but it's up to us to assimilate.

Sometimes it's just a hurdle you can't leap, or don't want to. Be a mutt. You are a new breed. From somewhere and born somewhere else. Maybe it's easier for some, and maybe it's an exciting prospect for some, but for me it isn't. I was from the enemy and lived among the enemy. Who's who and who's right and who's wrong?



It wasn't just the scrappy kids on the street either. I could hear it in a gentler way from my cousins. Some with questions pouring out of their excited mouths: *Do you go to the movies? What are the bands are you listening to? Your dad has a new car? We don't have new*

cars. Are the girls pretty? Do you have a girlfriend? Can you bring us music next time you come? Sneak us some magazines?

And there were the ones who were jealous. Fiercely jealous. I took all I had for granted. I was just a dumb selfish American. The enemy. The devil. I was just naïve. When I realized it, I didn't retaliate or defend myself. It wasn't worth the hurt for either party.

They were restricted. They were barred from any culture outside the one allowed to them by the powers that be. Anything that has slipped through was contraband. A risk not worth taking. You can't be a rebel. On the street they will take you away! I remember aunts and cousins defying the cries of their elders and wearing makeup. The rumors of the threats they faced on the

street. Moral police with needles in their tissues wiping away lipstick, the threat of jail, and the embarrassment that came after one would somehow get away with it. It was a trauma. The consequences of expressing yourself. The women had it the worst. The veils over their heads put out the fires of expression. They had to all look the same and cover every inch of their bodies so as not to invite the gaze of men. As if all the men were such animals that they couldn't control themselves.

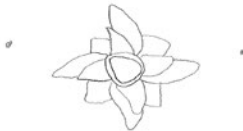
It took so much to shelter yourself at home and not let the darkness from outside the doors and windows consume you. The dual identity was a fixture here as well, for so many people who didn't follow the rules of the street.



Be someone else beyond your confines and get back to your true self when you are at home or at a friend's home.

The idea of home became so important for me to define. Though it could be a pretty simple concept for some, there are those of us who are bouncing between so many definitions of it. To define it has been almost impossible. I will struggle for years to figure it out. On one hand, there was all I was taking for granted, the freedoms I don't have to think twice about, where here there are insane decisions being grappled with before leaving the house for groceries. It just seemed unfathomable, so unfair. I felt so dumb. The consequences for them were real. Scary stuff. And here I am trying to define myself, with the earth of my

homeland running through my fingers.
Would kissing the ground make me feel
at home? Did I have to define it by the
color of my skin or my roots or where
I live and how I have to assimilate?
Maybe I have to pick one and just deal
with the frayed edges it comes with?
Maybe that's what America is? A place
where I can be and be free but have to
pay a price? Will it get better? Will it
subside? I didn't bank on that.



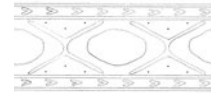


Home

So here I am today. After so many years in limbo, in no man's land, undefined and amorphous in daily life and world politics. I haven't been back to Iran in decades. Life kept me busy, policies kept me out, life events kept me from going. Life took turns—good ones, mostly, but not everything has changed. You would think adulthood would keep childish behavior at bay, but the fundamentals of being different don't end in high school. It actually becomes more absurd and surreal to live through it as an adult. You can't blame it on a dumb kid. It is what it is. It's the price you pay, or the fight you fight, or you can simply take the higher ground and smile at it all. Let's just say it is what it is and it's getting worse these days.

I no longer seek the definition of home. I have found it. It's not a place, or a heritage. It's not a distant land of ancestors or the street I live on. A home gets built. With bare hands, it gets built. It's the love I searched for and found. It's the pure unconditional love emanating from my wife's skin. Her scent and voice and words are home. Our shared experiences. It's looking into my son's bright eyes and seeing the future and what it holds for him. It's his needs that need to be met. It's my daughter's little hands holding my face as we fall asleep to a Persian lullaby, her eyes drifting into a comfortable and safe sleep. These are the truths I searched for and found. It's what allows me to look back at some darkness and find some answers. Most of the darkness can't be defined. Some of the answers I don't

care about anymore. I get to make work and seek out answers through that. All of this, all the push and the pull inspired me to never go home. It isn't there.



Andisheh Avini
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Marianne Boesky Gallery
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