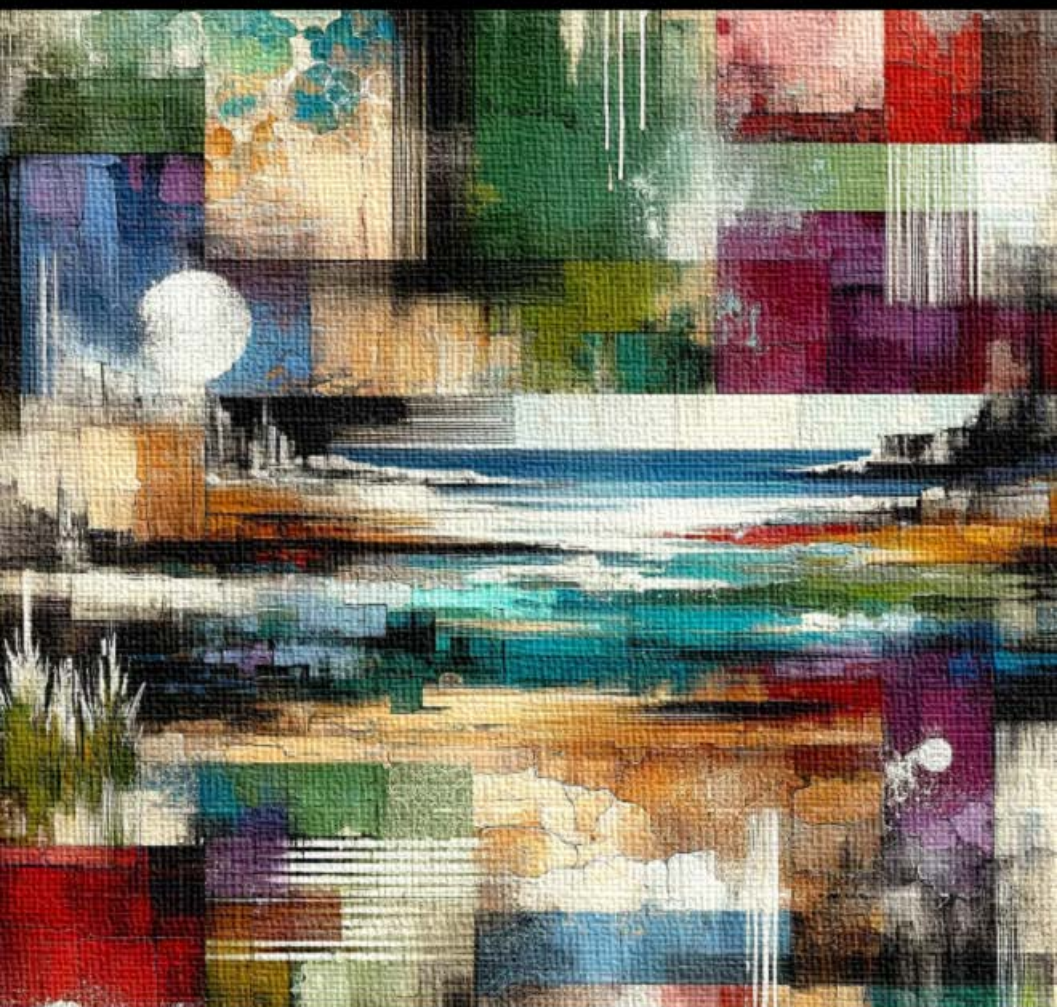


The Ancestral Sea

دریای نیاکان

a postmodern love story



Quinn Tyler Jackson



Knight Terra Press
littera manet sed lector oraculum

est. 1995



**The Etching Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; neither thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel *half* a Line,
Nor *all* thy tears wash out a *word* of it.**

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The Ancestral Sea: *a postmodern love story*

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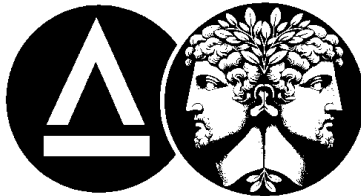
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The Ancestral Sea

a postmodern love story

¹ دریای نیاکان

Quinn Tyler Jackson



Knight Terra Press
littera manet sed lector oraculum

est. 1995

¹ *Daryâ-ye-Niâkân* (lit. “[The] Sea of Ancestors”).

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Portions of this work were developed from earlier forms:

Poems:

“Persian Carpets,” *Cerebrals Online Journal*, January-April 2001.

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Janus Incubus, PlaneTree UK, Wales, June 2002.

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Short Stories:

“Paladin,” *The Kudzu Monthly*, May 2002.

“Washed Up,” *Drop the Buddha*, November 2000.

“The Race,” *Drop the Buddha*, June 2000.

Content Advisory: This novel features a literary depiction of egregious, fatal misogynistic family violence, and explores the cross-generational impact of this in both thematic and concrete human terms. A very brief controlled physical altercation is depicted. There are highly stylized scenes of consensual sexuality. Characters consume alcohol socially and smoke tobacco excessively, and references are made to social opium use within an historical context. Reader discretion is advised due to mature themes.

MA-LSV (alcohol, tobacco, referenced narcotic use, self-harm)

Typesetting: This novel was typeset by the author using a font size of 10.5 points in Times New Roman. Inset poems have been set at 9 points and footnotes at 8.5 points. To maximize the utility of accessibility tools, care has been taken to avoid breaking sentences between pages, without altering font size or layout schemas to achieve this end. Further to this same end, pages have been numbered exclusively in Arabic numerals.

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About the Author

Quinn Tyler Jackson has been a silkscreen printer's apprentice, a bookseller's assistant, a gas pumpist, a freelance editor, a literary agent, a researcher, a Chief Architect, and is currently a Chief Scientist (Mathematics). Jackson is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, a Chartered Scientist, a Fellow of the Institute of Science & Technology (UK), a Senior Member of both the Association for Computing Machinery, and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and a Member of the London Mathematical Society, the American Mathematical Society, and the Writers' Union of Canada. His publication history spans three decades, and he has had novels, short stories, and poetry published, in addition to scholarly research papers and a research monograph.

Acknowledgments

The content in this novel was created and composed on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Nations of the **x^wməθk^wəyəm** (Musqueam), **Skwxwú7mesh** (Squamish), **k^wik^wəłəm** (Kwikwitlem), and **səlilwətał** (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples. The 1990 prototype version, set in Canada and Wales, was created and composed in Montréal (Tiohtiá:ke), on the traditional, unceded territory of the **Kanien'kehá:ka** (Mohawk) and **Anishinabeg** (Algonquin) Peoples. We thank the Peoples of these Nations who continue to live on these lands and care for them, along with the waters and all that is above and below.

Dania Sheldon, DPhil, was commissioned to provide peer review and assessment, and her comprehensive and insightful analysis resulted in thematically substantive, significant, and impactful revision and polishing of the final manuscript. Her comprehensive collaboration, particularly in the area of gender-representation was a significant driver toward revision and reconsideration by the author.

Front and back cover art generated by OpenAI's DALL-E 3 with the author's artistic direction.

The late Fred Candelaria (1929-2006), whom I knew as a friend and who guided my literary and poetic efforts across a decade in the 1990s and early 2000s, graciously permitted me to not only include his poem "Fu Manchu & the Dragon Lady," but trusted me to portray him in Chapter 1 of this work's precursor, *The Succubus Sea*.

The list of people who have made the present work possible, including those, sadly, who have since passed away, is lengthy, as this is a work whose production has spanned three-and-a-half decades. Though not named here, they are not forgotten.

Finally, the author wishes to acknowledge you, the reader, for it is ultimately the reader who actively completes any work.

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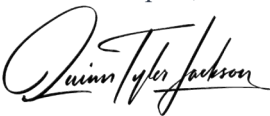
On the Author's Handling of Persian Topics

I do not claim to hold King Jamshid's oracle bowl, which would allow me to stare unerringly into the heart and souls of a people whose timeline spans millennia. In writing this novel, rather, I have analyzed and transformed the intimate insights of a deeply personal journey through the heart of expatriate Persian culture, woven into the tapestry of my early adult life over two decades of family connection, by virtue of my first marriage to an Iranian-Canadian woman, and the raising of our children in the blended culture of the Persian diaspora in Western Canada during an era then still at the zenith of much social change and struggle for reconciled cultural and national identities.

While that chapter of my life has since been closed for over a decade now, I was, for a time, welcomed into a circle wealthy in vibrancy, true warmth, and storied tradition, where the Persian New Year celebrations of *Nowruz* and *Sizdah Bedar* and the simple but important shared act of drinking of scalding tea over mesmerizing conversations became a lesson in modern Persian conduct and society and its unbroken historical and metaphysical bonds reaching far into antiquity at the foundational intersection of recorded Western history.

The essence of my experiences, coupled with the resilience and spirit of those I met and with whom I shared personal and impactful conversations about their lives during many of the eras touched upon herein, as they adjusted to their new realities, often talking on past midnight, have informed this narrative, and thus this work is my small homage to the soul of the Persian diaspora, an attempt to bridge cultures and share the enduring beauty of Iranian life and the Persian people, reflecting my deep esteem for a culture that has shaped my vision and, through it, this novel.

With full respect,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Quinn Tyler Jackson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "Q".

“Persian Carpets”

Ghosts we tea with
were us, are us, ominous.

When we conspire
breathing tea-soaked sugar
at our upper teeth,
over tea-machines
like *âqâ-khâns* ready for wars, words,
swords and backwards,
while children mete with their
feet at looms and their labor
makes *our* feet warm, and the drink
tastes better served in clay grails than
gold-leaf-lined glasses.

Paradise gardens in silk
and restraint, the spilled tea
won't stain tulip triumphs,
but the sun fades
the memories of the quatrains
woven delicately in, upon
over conscience:

The Etching Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; neither thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel *half* a Line,
Nor *all* thy tears wash out a *word* of it.²

² Omar Khayyam, FitzGerald translation, re-interpretation due to Jackson.

برای عاشقان و ساقیان³

تنگی می لعل خواهم و دیوانی
سدّ رمقی باید و نصف نانی
وانگه من و تو نشسته در ویرانی
خوشتر بود آن ز ملکت سلطانی

—کیم عمر خیام ۱۱۳۱-۱۰۴۸

For Love(rs) and Sâqis

*tangeh mey-e-la'al khâham va divâni
sadd-e-ramaqi bâyard va nesf-e-nâni
vangah man va to neshasteh dar virâni
khoshtar bud ân'z molkat-e-soltâni*

A flask of Ruby Wine, Ecstatic Verse,
Just half a Loaf, to stave off Hunger's Curse,
And Thou and I reclined 'midst Mortal Ruins,
Far more 't would be than *all* a Sultan's Purse!⁴

—Hakim Omar Khayyam (1048-1131)

³ *Berâ-ye âsheqân va sâqiân* ("For Lovers and Sâqis").

⁴ Translation due to Jackson.

The Novel

This is a work of *fiction*, and therefore all of the characters, dialogues, situations, and settings surrounding its characters are the products of creative artistic invention and interpretation. Any resemblance to real people, either living or dead, or non-public places is entirely coincidental.

Or as have begun the disclaimers in Persian tales for generations:

یکی بود، یکی نبود⁵

⁵ *Yeki bud, yeki na bud* (lit. “Was one, wasn’t one...”), “Once upon a time....”

San Francisco, Marina District, July 1994

1

Time was when Cyrus Drake could have looked out at San Francisco Bay and seen colors. His painter's mind would have begun applying azure, jade, and ivory to his canvas. But today, Drake saw no images or translations—just water and seagulls and wind as he heard the distant, almost guttural *oh-ah* signaling the arrival of another day of fog. A trolley crawled by, washing his attention back to the steep sidewalk where he stood. Looking north down Hyde Street through the light fog, he made out sailboats and barges, but Alcatraz Island, the greatest boat in the Bay, was invisible.

It had been a long time since Drake last went out in a rented motorboat, bundled up against the wind, with his camera and sketchbooks beside him. Precisely how long he had been held in this creative stillness he could not put a date to in his mind; he didn't commemorate undone tasks. He did recall, however, that *Rock Nostalgia* had sold to a wealthy collector in New York over a year earlier. It must have been at least just over a year since he had finished a canvas. His savings were almost gone. The money he'd made from his last gallery sales hadn't lasted long enough.

Drake walked his regular round: north down Hyde, east for a while, west, back up Hyde, through a few alleys—always the same alleys. When he was again standing at the spot he'd started, darkness had fallen, and he was left wanting something to do with himself. Friday night was time for him to have a drink with his accomplices at The Syncopated Cup. He got into his truck and drove straight for the jazz bar. The sound and frenzy that was the bar under Carl's reached Drake's ears before he had even stopped the engine.

A dozen or so steps pulled him down into blithe syncopation and a moving torrent of familiar faces. A hand beckoned him the moment he came in. Drake recognized Denis Dwight, the playwright, by the large Freemason's ring on his hand. He knew that where sat Dwight, also sat Abe Wately and Jules Hatchet, and with this trinity came the full bock and a few moments of silence despite the constant wash of their words.

"Drake! We were wondering if you'd be coming down tonight or not," Jules said, barely audible over the crash of the crowd. He reached out his hand and his sax player's grasp nearly crushed Drake's fingers.

"Figured I'd see what was up down here," Drake returned, looking over one, then the other shoulder to make his point. "Seems pretty laid back here tonight."

"They're all winding down for the reading," Abe explained. "You should have heard it in here fifteen minutes ago. At least you'll be able to hear yourself think."

Drake took the one free seat at the table. His buddies always kept a seat for him on Fridays.

"A beer on me, then?" Denis asked with a quick pat on his wallet pocket.

"Sure thing, Denis. I hear *Hemingway's Waistline* is pulling in some cash for you these days." Drake reached across and gave his comrade a whack on the arm. "Good thing you opted for a cut of the door this time around."

"*Hemingway's Wastebasket*," Denis corrected him.

"Right you are, Denis!" Drake exclaimed. "A beer on the *Wastebasket*, then."

By the time Drake's bock made it to the table, most of the regulars had either sat down or found a solid section of wall, beam, or guest to lean against. Drake toasted the playwright's success. A few tips off the head and dark, frothy sips later, he lit up a cigarette and took drag after drag on it before asking who the poet of the night was.

"Don Chang pulled in a Canadian," Abe said. He knew that Wately fancied himself San Francisco's resident arts expert. It came with his degrees, Abe had always boasted, though no one asked just what degrees—some suspected, judging from the way Abe drank, they must have been in fluid dynamics and chemistry.

It was the tradition of The Syncopated Cup for everyone to hush up enough that the poet or novelist reading wouldn't need a microphone. As the poet came out with two black books of his poetry, Drake could hear the footsteps carry through the place like the pounding of the surf, though the man did not carry himself heavily.

Fred Candelaria, Abe wrote down on a napkin and handed it to him.

All eyes in the place were focused on Candelaria, and the bartender dimmed the lights a bit, everywhere except onstage. A familiar feeling flushed through Drake as the lamps dimmed, and although it was similar to the lightness he felt when sitting and listening to the poets in the clamorous teahouses of his youth, he could not help thinking of the differences between the jazz bar and the Persian teahouses he remembered from his boyhood on the Caspian.

This man was holding his book of poetry open before him. Even from where Drake sat, even with the buoyant heads of everyone in front of him, he could see the sharp red lines and the large gray Chinese character on the book's cover. The poets of Mazandaran Province that he remembered never *read* poetry; they *recited* it, even *enacted* it. He considered the differences this brought to his understanding but could not articulate inwardly.

Here, they all held books in front of themselves, whether they remembered their poetry by heart or not, but it did remind him that the jazz bar existed to peddle overpriced liquor and fellowship, whereas the teahouse in the mist of his memories stood as a refuge where the poet could tabernacle with his people.

The poet first introduced the books from which he would be reading. When Candelaria began reading, the room seemed to lean in, as if drawn by the yaw of an invisible force. His voice, both gentle and commanding, wove through the verses with a rhythm that felt at once new and ancient. The poems told stories and the emotions they stirred within his chest were as familiar as if they were his own. With each line, Drake felt a pull, a longing for something unspeakably vast in its scope, a sense of stark wanderlust and a craving for the depths of human connection. He had not expected to be stirred in this way, and for just a while allowed himself to embrace it.

And as he embraced the present moment, the poet's words broke out into the room, rolled off the walls, and echoed back:

more real than flesh bone or blood
ruled mysteriously east
of western imaginations
captivating mistress
& a master's domination
of opium pirates
& enslaved maidens
forbidden hidden treasures
& pleasures perverse
in fantastic utterly novels
& comic lurid book rituals
too exotically erotic
& sensual
they turned drab us
into subtle orientals

to go all up in smoke
when we left the dens
& torture chambers
of adolescence
— if ever we did (or do

Although the poet read other poems, the almost reluctantly nostalgic words of “Fu Manchu & the Dragon Lady” stayed with Drake for the rest of the reading. Had this man *known*? Had he been to Iran, to the shore of the Caspian, and smelled the opium burning in the bowls of the hookahs?

The mere mention of opium brought back the warmth of the teahouse his grandfather had always frequented with him. The fishermen and the lotus eaters in their retirements. Of course, he hadn't been there. The poem was of Manchu and his Dragon Lady, not Leili and her Majnoun. Drake closed his eyes and tried to bring back the sights and sounds of that building in Tarsdejh, but as soon as the poet finished his reading, everyone stood up and applauded, and there at once flowed no more flesh bone or blood to rule mysteriously east his now Western imagination.

Drake was barely listening to his companions' conversation at all but instead continued to try to conjure up the images of his grandfather at the teahouse in Tarsdejh; these days, though, it took more than verse to bring back paintings to his naked canvas.

"Drake?" someone asked, trying to tow him into the actual conversation.

"Drake?" Abe then repeated. "You with us? Did one beer give you a buzz?"

Drake shook his head and lifted the mug to his lips to take a sip from what he then discovered to be an empty glass. He gave his chums a shrug about the whole thing. Even sound seemed hard to come by these days.

"No opinion?" Jules asked.

"Got your mind on something big?" Denis asked. Denis Dwight always tried to pry personal information out of his buddies for insider material for his plays, and they all knew his game but didn't mind if one or two of their personal problems rose from phoenix ashes onstage as words from out the mouths of actors and comedians.

"Just going over that poem," Drake admitted. "Up here," he added, tapping his head with the hand he held his cigarette in, shaking a spray of dead cinders to the floor. He flipped through the pages, looking at the white space, he found the poem.

"I'm thinking he brings in the exotic, fetishized orientalist imagery, but then, with a succinct stroke Edward Saïd would likely appreciate, ends the poem with the aside that these are the fabrications of the opium smoke of cultural *adolescence* and as such, we must leave such lurid distortions behind us, no matter how difficult this exorcism is in practice," Drake commented.

Dwight nodded in agreement. "A poignant deconstruction."

Feeling the book's glossy cover in his hands, he caught a glimpse of someone he thought he recognized amongst the flotsam and jetsam. With a quick jerk of his head, he focused his gaze and saw that his intuition had been right. Across the room with her journalist friends stood Valery Rockford, his occasional lover. The camaraderie with Dwight, Wately, and Hatchet was beginning to wash thin, so he waved his hand about and she caught sight of him, said a few words to her friends, and walked over to the men's table.

“I’ll be damned!” Denis said before tipping his beer back and finishing it. “Rocky-Wit Rockford. Burn any good books lately?”

“I just attended *Hemingway’s Cleaning Lady*,” she replied, winking so that only Drake would catch the flicker of her eyelid.

“That’s *Wastebasket*,” Denis corrected her. “*Hemingway’s Wastebasket*. What is with....”

“I know,” she admitted. “I *liked* it, you know. Too bad it’s so far into the season, or I *would* be writing kind words about it. Would have been an excellent review, I promise.”

“You mean you don’t just go to plays to burn the playhouse down?” Denis asked, standing up from his seat to offer it to her.

“You wrote a *fine* play. You know, Denis, I *never* praise with my mouth what I’d stab with my pen. I do *some* things *entirely* for pleasure,” she answered, looking at Drake.

“I bet,” Abe returned as he stirred a mixture of ashes and beer in the ashtray in front of him until it frothed up. “Like pull out aspiring playwrights’ fingernails.”

Taking the offered chair, Valery asked Drake, “How is it you’re so *compartmentalized* that I haven’t met your friends after all these years? I’m so rarely here the nights you are, though.”

Since Valery’s arrival at the table, Drake had regained his concentration. “Yes, funny that, isn’t it? You already know Denis Dwight from his plays. This is Abe.”

“Abe Wately?” she guessed.

“You read poetry?”

“Yes. What did you think of tonight, Abe?” Valery asked, gesturing at the now empty stage.

“You’re trying to bait me,” Abe said. “Pulling me in for the *bang* on the head. I’ll find myself quoted if I’m not careful.”

“You’re right,” Valery responded. “I’m a gadfly ricochet.”

“I’m Jules Hatchet. I play sax. *Lady Hatchet*.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jules. I get the ‘Lady’ part is a stage name, but is that last name for real?”

“For real? Yes. Hatchet. Happy circumstance. Hatchet. I’m as real as can be.” He mimicked a buzz and then a ricochet sound.

“Cohen Benjamin said he was coming here tonight for the reading, but I haven’t seen him around,” Valery noted. “Have any of you seen him frolicking about?”

“Benny? Not tonight I haven’t,” Drake replied. “I’ve been meaning to talk to him about his novella. It’s been a while.”

“I was hoping to myself,” she returned. “See what he’s been up to with his writing and whether I’ll have anything novel-length from him to review soon. Normally I go to *my* watering hole on Friday nights to be with my girlfriends over a mojito. But he *definitely* told me that he’d be here *tonight*. If I had Chekov’s gun handy, I’d shoot him when I see him!”

“Oh my, that sounds rather foreboding,” Dwight chimed in.

“Knowing him, he’s all passed out behind the bar,” Abe suggested. “But damn it, Rockford, don’t you *dare* quote me on that! I swear, one day, everything I say will end up in quotes.”

“Careful what you wish for, Abe,” she warned Wately. “Rumor has it that Cohen’s finally started his *roman à clef*.”

All the others at the table shrugged their indication of not having come across Cohen Benjamin. Drake stood up, arched his back to take out the stiffness, and asked if Valery would like to go out for some fresh air. She immediately agreed and went over to her friends’ table to get her coat.

“Hey, Drake, that’s some piece of ass you’ve been keeping company with,” Abe said when Valery was well out of earshot.

Drake dismissed the off-color banter with a forced smile, and then, leaning over the table, whispered to his tablemates, “It’s bullshit sexist comments like Abe just belched over his beer fumes that have kept you lot ‘compartmentalized.’” Valery came back to him quickly and the two were soon standing outside the bar at the top of the stairs.

“How has it been, Cyrus?” Valery asked, putting her arm lithely around his waist. It felt comfortable there, so he returned in kind as she pulled him a bit closer still.

“Ah, you know,” he replied.

“You doing anything else tonight?”

Drake knew she was asking if she could come over to his apartment, and he knew that meant they would end up in bed, since whenever they met, they ended up at either his or her apartment, in bed, but it didn’t bother him that this was what she really wanted from him; her arm felt comfortable, and for the brief time they were together, he would feel *comfortable*, even if not complete.

“Nothing much doing,” he finally answered. “You could offer to save me from another Friday night with *those* characters. Their banter is no *digestif* to the poetry earlier in the night.”

“Let’s say we go over to *your* place and listen to some mood music?” she asked, smiling again as though she already knew what his answer would be.

Since she had come to the bar in a taxi, they left the parking lot together in his truck, headed for his apartment. At the door of his apartment, he had to fumble with his keys. After taking off his coat and lighting up another cigarette, Drake walked over to his collection of compact discs and flipped through the Persian drawer of the holder.

“Anything in particular you’d like to listen to?” he asked.

“They all sound delightful to me,” she replied from his black leather couch. “Just pick one *you* like.”

When she said that, his finger was on a case that seemed, with its flowers and butterflies on the insert, as good a choice as any, so he put it in the player and sat beside her. The drums and flute began pulsing. By the time Alireza began singing, Valery’s smooth arm had already worked its way around Drake’s waist.

“This sounds nice,” she said as the singer called almost like a Caspian reed warbler about fire and the ecstasy of verse when hollered by a lover unable to contain the words any longer.

Cyrus Drake had known when Valery Rockford had asked to come over that what she essentially wanted from him was a good night’s session with the frantic two-backed beast, so it didn’t bother him when she started unbuttoning his shirt, rubbing his chest, and nibbling at his left ear. Valery was a warm, cozy person, an acerbic theatre critic, a good laugh now and again, and although she came across sometimes as too enthusiastic a bed partner, Drake usually got enough from her company that it made the inevitable trip between the sheets worth his while.

This time was no different from any other. The flute, drums, and the warbler cry of Alireza beat a wanton cadence in the other room as Drake and Valery did what it was they did together. He knew Valery wouldn’t mind if she found out that, while she’d been digging her painted fingernails and signing her name in his flesh, he’d finally been able to find a fairly painless way to work his electricity bill into his hurting budget.

He also knew that she would never ask how it had been for him anyway; hers was to get and go in the morning, and that was all Drake and Valery had been about for the six years they'd known each other.

Drake decided to not even bother striving for his own. She pulled his face to hers and kissed him deeply, but the depth was hers, the fire was entirely hers, and the sounds were hers; nothing belonged to him.

"God, that was good," she commented when they were done.

Drake deftly walked into the bathroom, took off his empty safe, washed his hands, and then lit a cigarette. He eased himself back onto the bed.

"You're still a right spear," Valery commented, rolling over.

It wasn't the first time, but she never seemed to have noticed before. Drake coughed up a bit of tar when she said it.

She slid her head down to his navel, kissing his abdomen.

He didn't know what to say. His cigarette tasted good; he was comfortable with her. Through the blue haze of the cigarette smoke, he thought for a moment that perhaps it was the smoke that smelled of Caspian locust wood and not the misty wisps of adolescent dens or torture chambers. He closed his eyes and let Valery finish what she'd started. His soul was too washed up to fight. Washed up. That was it. All washed up. Time was when Cyrus Drake was washed up on the shore of an emptiness he could no longer paint.

Valery Rockford was a redhead. As Cyrus Drake stared at her naked form beside him, he admired the curve of her hip and the fall of the shiny aqua silk sheet that barely draped over it—but not quite enough to extinguish the delta that burned red even as she slept. She lay on her side when she slept, with one hip high, the other in the softness of the mattress. At her slender waist, she twisted a bit. Her messy, curly, flaming hair blew all about her head, so much that he couldn't see her face.

As he puffed at his cigarette, he looked back and forth across the room, comparing the square, cubic design of his apartment with Valery's smooth, living form. The Massoumi original on the wall across from him had curves, like her, but the rest of the room made him think that Valery would be out of her element living in a place like this. Her element was fire, his was water.

Drake gently slipped out of bed to find more cigarettes. He remembered having left the pack in his jacket, and he tiptoed to the main closet near his front door and found the pouch. It was nearly empty—he made a mental note to go out and buy more.

With the few cigarettes he still had remaining in his hand, Drake walked slowly out to the terrace. It faced a small garden enclosure and the trees there gave him the illusion of privacy. The private balcony had been one of the main things about that apartment that had convinced him to sign the lease years before, as he did not enjoy having his morning smoke with eyes on him.

His mind flew a muddle as he stood there, gently dragging smoke into his lungs. A few minutes later, Valery strolled outside, naked. She walked over to the edge and leaned on the barrier. "It's a good thing *they* can't see me," she chuckled.

“Good morning,” he finally said as he crushed his cigarette butt into his outdoor ashtray. “The pity I feel for them.”

She turned around, folded her arms loosely, and said, “Good morning, Cyrus. Have a good sleep?”

“A gentle one,” he said. “If nothing else, I went gently into the good night.”

Valery laughed. “Cyrus! Don’t! *Always* with the allusions! Can you be serious, even for a minute?”

“Curious Cyrus can’t be serious,” he replied, almost biting his tongue to say it. “Something on your mind?”

She unfolded her arms and put one hand on either hip. “I’ve been thinking about you a lot,” she said. “It was opportune that we should bump into one another last night.”

Drake thought about how she had bucked against him the night before. He wanted to chuckle but held it in. It would have been an empty chuckle anyway. She had been right on the mark: he laughed and made fun of things and went through the *motions* of looking happy—with the too-constant poetic allusions and half-jokes—it was all too corny, too contrived, too persistent. The things that made him smile these days were mere wordplay.

“I was looking forward to having you over again sometime soon and then we met at The Cup,” he then admitted. “I’ve been pretty bored with myself. Fifty-something and still living the bachelor artist’s life, nothing much doing, not much cash left to burn, getting damned cynical about just about everything. You have seven years to catch up to *my* level of cynicism, Val, and by then, well, we both know a *lot* can happen in seven years.”

“What have you been up to *lately*?”

His only answer was, “Ah, you know....”

“Still haven’t been painting?”

He pointed to the apartment and shrugged. “If I don’t soon, I won’t be staying *here*. I’m running out of money in a big way. But I’m not one to give in to such things easily. I’ll find a way.”

They talked some more about his suite. Valery then admitted that she had always wanted a place like his, with some privacy to enjoy the naked air. After a few more minutes, they wandered back inside and dressed for the day. After Valery dressed, she went to his refrigerator, pulled out an assortment of breakfast foods, and she and Drake styled a classic breakfast for two.

Leaning over his steaming Spanish omelet, Drake could not help but feel that it might be worth a try inviting Valery to move in with him. They got along famously well, he was lonely, she liked the place, and most of all, he needed someone to share the expenses. He was about to ask what she thought of the idea when the phone rang, and he got up to answer it.

“Your father has passed away,” came the voice at the other end. “The funeral will be on Wednesday. Can you fly over?”

Drake didn’t know what to say, and so he remained silent. There were no words, thoughts, or feelings inside him able to escape past the prison of his tightly clenched teeth.

“You there?”

“I’m here,” he finally replied. “Was it a painful death?”

“Doctor says it was peaceful,” came his uncle’s voice. “I know it’s some short notice, but deaths always are. We’d like you to come, me and the others, if you can. Could you let me know at least by tomorrow if you’re going to be coming for the funeral and the reading of the will?”

“Damn it, Andrew, I’ll be there. I’ll pull some strings and be there. Count on it!” He hung up the phone and closed his eyes tightly, rubbing his lids vigorously with his fingers to make the images in his mind less intense.

“Cyrus? Did someone *die*?” Valery asked as she walked over from the table to sit beside him on the couch. She put her slender arm around him to give him comfort, but his emptiness would not let him take solace from her touch.

“My head is spinning,” he said. “My father is dead. I need a drink. Could I trouble you to pour me something strong?”

Valery retreated to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and asked, “No *trouble* at all! How strong?”

“Damned strong,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Your father was the Iranian one?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Was your father your Iranian parent, or your mother? You *never* talk about it in any detail.”

“Well, my last name is *Drake*,” he snapped. “That surname’s at least as old as Sir Francis, and most definitely *not* Iranian, so it must have been my *mother* who was the Iranian parent.” He immediately regretted his tone.

She returned with a full glass of vodka. It burned all the way down, but the feeling didn't bother Drake. "Sorry for snapping at you," he apologized. "That came from my gut, *not* my heart."

"No problem, Cyrus," she said. "Your *dad* just died. How are you *supposed* to act? You'll find your center soon enough."

"A man acts as a man *should* act," Drake said. After saying this, he wasn't entirely sure where the words came from. They sounded familiar, but he couldn't place their origin. Had he said them to someone else once? They felt like artifacts of a past since thrown into a hearth and let to the sky to billow away.

"Pardon?" Valery rested her head on Drake's shoulder and stroked his chest. She had stroked his chest many times before to indicate that she wanted sex, but Drake could tell that all she wanted to do this time was offer a moment's comfort, even if the gesture ended up amounting to the same thing.

"I don't know. Please forget about it." He stood up, walked over to the phone, and tapped out a familiar tune on the buttons.

"Hey, Russ!" he said when the other side answered.

"Drake? Got something for me finally?"

"Can we get together tonight for a very quick meeting, say, at Pat Maloney's Horn, around six?" Drake immediately asked.

"Sure thing. What's up?"

"I prefer to talk about it in person," he replied, knowing he had a better chance of getting his agent to do him a favor if he had to say yes or no to him to his face. "Six?"

"Maloney's Horn, six," Russ replied before hanging up.

Drake dug into his pocket for his keys. He pulled the spare key to his apartment from the chain and lobbed it over to Valery. "Listen, Val, I've got to be alone with just me and my truck for a while. You can hang around here if you want. I'll be back after I talk with my agent. I want to be alone now, but I don't know how alone I want to be later on, so I'm not taking any chances."

Valery smiled a familiar smile. "Could you drop me off at my place? I'll make my way back here around five. I'll bring some proper culinary accompaniments."

"Sure, let's go. Thanks again for understanding."

"Like I said, you're *allowed* to snarl a bit; your father just passed away." She then smiled and added, "Your ship's been *keeled*. But *calm* yourself, Ahab."

“Yes, Starbuck, will do,” he replied. “*Nice* allusion, there, by the way,” he teased.

“We’re *all* only as witty as our last allusion,” she returned, winking and smiling, and for a moment Drake’s spirit lifted thanks to her effort.

Drake held her arm and walked with her to the front door of the apartment. They were soon in their coats and on their way to his truck. After dropping Valery off at her building, Drake drove directly to the large self-storage warehouse where he kept his old canvases and painting supplies. Among the broken easels, musty sketchbooks, and bent canvas frames, he found a canvas with a portrait that he had painted in his early days in San Francisco. He had intended it to be a portrait of his mother, as he remembered her face, but for reasons he could no longer recall, it had become abstract and looked nothing like her at all. He put it in a canvas portfolio and carried it under his arm. The smell of the paint was still in his nostrils by the time he made it to his truck.

He had time to pass until his appointment with Russ, but he didn’t know what to do with himself, so he drove about the city aimlessly for a while, until he became bored with that. He parked near a theatre, paid to watch the feature, but walked out halfway through the movie, unimpressed and unconvinced. Finally, after some more hours of wandering about, quarter to six came and he headed for Pat Maloney’s Horn.

It was a nice place, as chowder houses went, with a portrait of the famous Maloney hanging in the main dining room for everyone to see. Drake ordered a small shrimp salad, with no real intention of eating any of it, and waited for his agent to arrive. Russ McGuire arrived at the restaurant at exactly seven minutes after six according to Drake’s watch. Drake shook his hand without even trying to force a smile. The folder sat on the chair beside him, out of his agent’s sight.

“What’s up?” Russ asked after ordering a bowl of Boston clam chowder. He was still holding a menu open in front of his face when Drake answered.

“My father died from cancer a few days back.” The salad in front of him seemed worthwhile after all, so he speared a shrimp.

“Your father? In Manhattan? Passed away? Cancer?”

“Yes,” he replied, chewing the tiny, salty thing in his mouth.

“Very sorry to hear that, my friend,” Russ said, putting his menu down. “What can I do? Anything at all. Seriously.”

“I need some money to go to the funeral,” Drake replied. He put the portfolio on the table and slid it slowly toward Russ, whose eyes were wide open at finally being given a piece.

Russ took the portfolio, opened it, and then spent about five minutes examining the canvas it held closely with the loupe he pulled out of his right vest pocket. He shut the case and looked intently at Drake. “It’s clearly from early in your career,” he said, turning it around to read the date on the back. “Why haven’t I ever seen this before, and do you have any more?”

“You think you can sell it?”

“Sure can! First off, it’s *exquisite*. I have six or seven buyers queued up for your next offering, Cyrus, so *this one’s already* sold, as far as I’m concerned. So again... do you have *more*?”

“I have about three dozen or so older canvases. That and a *stack* of sketchbooks. This was from when I still had the clause that let me hold back any works I didn’t want on the market.”

“Yes, I see it *was* a ways back. Are the others as good as *this* one? Do you have *any* idea what you’re sitting on?” Russ pulled out his checkbook, scribbled out a check, and handed it to Drake. “You let me put on a show, take some photos of the best of the others for private buyers, and you can cash this advance against sales and be on your way to New York. You’re sitting on a *vault* of collateral with this one alone. That old hold-back clause in our agreement may have paid off well for you, if we play this right.”

Drake pushed the painting back over to Russ and looked at the check. He nearly choked on a shrimp on seeing the amount. “Are you sure about those numbers? Can I borrow your loupe?”

“Like I said, Cyrus, I have practically already sold your next six or seven. There’s a buyer who’ll snatch this one up for three times what I’m advancing you. Your early period is *exactly* what this buyer is looking for. This one predates your departure from abstract-centric pieces, and that puts it into a class of its own for its rarity factor across your entire career. We’re at *that* stage of your engagement now.” He then stared directly into Drake’s eyes and added, “You do what you must for however long you must to deal with your father’s passing, and I’ll make sure to build a fortress around your situation in the meantime. It’s what I do.”

Drake handed Russ the keys to the self-storage and wrote the address of the place on the back of one of Russ's cards. "You put on the show, sell what you can to whomever you can, keeping how much total stock you have quiet—those cards stay close to your chest. If they don't have titles, call them 'Study #N.' Start counting N at some number you feel fits the mystique. They're all dated on the back, and since you seem to have broken my career into periods, those dates might help with your narrative."

"It's definitely a plan," Russ replied. He pulled out his cell phone, tapped out a number, and put it to his ear. "I'll be sure to avoid flooding the market. I'm on it."

Russ then began talking as soon as the other party answered. "Yeah, Willie, this is Russ. Yeah. I'm so sorry to be calling you at your home number at *night*. You know it. Listen, I need the next available seat, first class, to New York, from our account. Open-ended return date." He looked up at the ceiling of the restaurant. "Uh-huh. *Ouch*. No, no, I get it. Late notice, price can't be helped. No worries whatsoever." His face contorted. "The ticket is for Cyrus Drake. Okay man, thanks a bunch. Great. Bye."

He put the phone back on his belt, put the canvas under his arm, and looked straight into Drake's eyes. "You just drive by the Agency and pick up the ticket tomorrow around noon, heh? Sunday or not, I'll be there. Willie says he can get you a Tuesday flight, seat up near the front all nice and quiet, which has you ready for the funeral on time."

"Thanks, Russ," Drake replied. "I owe you one, man. You're the best."

"No, Drake, you don't owe me *shit*," Russ replied, tapping on the canvas. "Your hard work pretty much single-handedly *made* my career as an agent," he said. "I've gotten a few solid names on board because of the way you took off, but even so, your action is *still* my mainstay. And let's face it, you've always known the importance of personal brand management, which always pays more than just dividends."

Drake finished his salad, stood, shook Russ's hand, and went outside. Once there, he lit up a cigarette and blew smoke rings. When the smoke was done, he got into his truck and drove home.

3

“Have you ever noticed that all we seem to do when we’re together is screw and eat?” Valery asked. She lifted her beer mug and took a tiny sip from it.

Drake had been staring at the brass trumpet on the wall of The Syncopated Cup when she’d spoken. It didn’t take much thought on his part for him to reply, “I guess we certainly do our share of that.” He picked up his club sandwich and bit into it. “It is nice to get out on the town with you for a change. Thanks for suggesting it, or I’d have opted for staying in, most likely.”

“Well, I figured you might be distracted for a little while,” she said. “I see from the way you’re wolfing down four food that you’ve at least kept your zest for eating.”

Drake finished the sandwich and followed it up with a sip of dark Scottish ale. “Say... did I ever tell you that I wanted to be a trumpet player when I was younger?” he changed the subject.

“A *what?*” Valery’s eyes lit up.

“Well, I wanted to be a lot of things when I was younger,” he admitted. He pointed at the trumpet on the wall and made a gesture as if he were playing one. “The idea of being a jazz trumpeter—well, let’s just say it was one of my *many* bright ideas as a child. It just shone somewhat brighter than most.”

“That’s a side of you I’ve never seen, Cyrus,” she said before finishing the beer.

Drake wanted to laugh. What side of him *had* she seen? The naked side. He smiled and it made her smile back. “My father used to play,” he went on. “He became quite the musician later on. He played *many* open mics all around Greenwich Village after we moved to the United States in 1953.”

“Really? As I said earlier, you never talk about your parents other than to say you were born in Iran and that you’re half-Iranian. I read *that* on some of your biographical blurb material at a showing, I think. That’s the sum of what I know of your past, other than your obvious love for things Persian in your suite.”

“He picked it up during the war.”

“Which war was that?”

“Second World War. While stationed in Paris—just after the Liberation. He was billeted with a French family. The husband was a full-on jazz musician. That’s what bit my father in the ass. Father returned to Iran with a brand-new trumpet in one hand and the basics of jazz fresh in his head. And time to blow.”

Valery nodded as she listened intently, causing the lights in her red hair to reflect like fires.

“So, wanting to be every little bit like him, I naturally took to trumpet from an early age. Copying him was a habit I took with me for some years; I volunteered for service in ‘Nam in ‘62 and polished my way to sergeant. Always trying to be like him.”

“Those *were* the early days of Vietnam; you got on that train quickly, it seems. But I just don’t hear *trumpets* when I imagine hearing Persian music. Trumpets sound the *Reveille* to me.”

“That *was* the very first song I learned. In those days—” He stopped himself when he realized he was having a conversation with Valery unlike any he’d had with her before. “In those days, well, it’s hard to explain what it meant to have one American and one Iranian parent. Our house was like the *de facto* US embassy in Tarsdejh. Tarsdejh—that’s the town where I was born. On the Caspian. The name roughly translates to Dreaded Fortress.”⁶

“Oh, that sounds *exciting!*” Valery responded with a sparkle in her voice. “You lived near a haunted Persian citadel? How absolutely *wonderful* it must have been to play hide-and-seek!”

“It sounds *far* more magnificent than it was, to be honest. The citadel that once was there is now, and was for centuries before we ever lived there, mostly a lost, sandy memory; said to have been ordered built by Cyrus the Great himself, before even the infamous Leonidas and Xerxes’ showdown at Thermopylae. There wasn’t very much left to hide *behind*, let alone *in*.”

⁶ From *tars* (fear, dread) *dejh* (castle, fortress).

“It’s such a shame what time does to all things,” she mused wistfully. “It can turn stone into echoes and lavish tales told over campfires.” She sighed. “I hope to one day be told in a tale.”

“Oh, you are a six *full* shelves of tales, Val,” he assured her. “Anyway, I was named after an ancient piece of rock from that fortress. It sits near the beach, well-worn so that it looks like a seat. The locals called it—and perhaps still do—Cyrus’ Throne, or rather *Takht-e-Kurosh*, but my father *insisted* to my mother, who named me after that very chunk of stone, that my actual name be the Westernized form. Somewhere a fortune teller in Ancient Persia was leaning over the ear of the King of the World and whispering courtier sweet-nothings about how lasting his efforts would be to his Empire. It’s why I called my most recent work, the painting of Alcatraz Island, *Rock Nostalgia*.”

“Thus spake Ozymandias,” Valery put forward playfully.⁷ “It seems I know so *little* about you.” She lifted her hand to order another beer. “You are *not* an open book A real ne’er told tale.”

It started to dawn on Drake that Valery was either taking a genuine interest in him, or she was diligently trying to make idle conversation until they were again in a place where they could have at it. She might even be politely pretending to be interested because she didn’t want him to feel abandoned by a friend at a time so near the news of his father’s death.

“You don’t *have* to, you know,” he finally said.

⁷ “Ozymandias”

I met a traveler from an antique land,
 Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
 Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal, these words appear:
 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
 Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley

“I don’t have to what?”

“Well—and don’t get me wrong here—we’ve always been so damned *good* at the ‘screw and eat’ scenario that I just don’t know how comfortable with this new ‘screw, eat, talk about the past’ thing I can be.” He could see in Valery’s eyes that he had hit a nerve, but he could not tell which nerve he’d hit, and so prepared himself for *any* reply. “That sounded crass on my part; I’m sorry. Seems I have a case of foot-in-mouth disease today.”

“We’ve *often* talked of the past, to be fair. Just not *your* past. Oh, don’t worry, Cyrus, I don’t get you—or us and who we are to one another—wrong,” she said at last with a wide, gorgeous smile. “I’m a rolling stone, you know. No matter how much of your soul or past you decide to reveal, or *vice versa*—and I do mean *vice*—I won’t go trying to attach myself to you like a chain.” She took her next beer from the waiter who had finally arrived at the table. “And I’d take out the torch to cut the links if you ever tried to chain me. You and I have a great little unspoken understanding about all that, don’t we?”

Drake smiled back at her.

“Even *with* that understanding, though, there is room for me to anchor down for a *few* days during what *must* be a rough time for you. Even a passing ship can anchor and offer succor for a *few* days, don’t you think?”

“I am happy we understand one another,” Drake returned, knowing full well that—if he was being honest with himself—he’d been seriously thinking about asking her to move in with him just a *minute* before he’d learned of his father’s death over the phone, and felt a bit uneasy about his *ersatz* reserve with her in light of it having been *his* initiative to open up with her about his childhood. He knew from experience, and Valery’s own assessment of what they were to one another, that the degree of indecision and evasion he was experiencing meant that asking her to move in was very probably the *least* rational thing he could have set in motion. He was in no place personally to redirect his life so recklessly as a matter of ill-considered expediency.

“We *do* understand one another,” she said. “You’ve *always* had a certain amount of emotional distance and I’ve always *needed* that *very* thing. That doesn’t make us odd or even broken. Those are words for other people on the outside looking in at us.”

She put her hand on the back of his. “That’s what’s kept us *kind* to one another over the years. For every pot, there’s a lid. We fit *for now*.”

Drake put his free hand on top of hers and said, “Such a way with words. I *think* you just called me Mr. Right Now.”

“Ah, speaking of which... Right now I have a hard deadline to meet, so how about we race back to my place? I’ll fax my column to the bosses-who-be and then we can have a good screw before you’re off in the morning to prepare for the unpleasant business you have at hand? There’s no use in being *square* about the pleasures of life, don’t you agree?”

It gave Drake great relief that Valery understood where their boundaries always remained. He stood, finished his beer in one gulp, and walked out with her beside him.



“You notice anything different with my apartment?” she asked as she unlocked the door. “Let’s see if you can get it right.” She pushed open the door and turned on the light.

Drake looked around. It had been a *very* long time since he’d been at *her* place, and the furniture had been subtly moved about, but he guessed that she hadn’t been talking about that. When his gaze made it to her library, he knew what she meant.

“You have quite a few more books than the last time I was here,” he remarked. “Quite a few more, indeed. Three shelves’ worth, to be exact. That’s a wonderful addition to the collection.”

“Exactly. Leave it to your painter’s eye to catch the details. And *remember* them! My sister, Gina—you might have met her *once*?—was promoted and relocated to London, so she gave me *all* her books. We have similar tastes. Take a look through them,” she said as she took his light summer coat to the closet just down the hall. “And I want to hear the *envy*.”

Drake closed and locked the door and walked over to the bookshelves. Valery had always been an organized person, and her new library annex was no exception. In no time he had found one he wanted to read. He opened Dylan Thomas’ *Deaths and Entrances* to “The Conversation of Prayer” and started reading.

“She and I have fairly wide tastes in reading, as you can see. That one you’re holding is a first edition, by the way. Just wait until I pound out this column and fax it off. Would you like something to drink, Cyrus?”

“I’m fine for now, thanks; the beer’s still buzzing in me.” Drake closed the book and put it back on the shelf where he’d found it. “Yes, I met Gina once, way back,” he said. “So now you are *nine* shelves full of tales to be told, Valery. This is a great collection. I used to own a copy of one just like this first edition myself. Brings back memories. Except mine was *signed*.”

“*Used to?* Oh dear, how did you manage to let that one fall through your fingers?” she asked.

“Gift from a war buddy of my father who *somehow* had the chance to ask Thomas himself to sign it for me before he returned to Iran from Great Britain after the War. I made the *huge* mistake of bringing it over to Vietnam with me,” he said. “I’d like to say in a weepy, nostalgic tone that the book saved me from a stray bullet to the heart or something dramatic like that, but it was no SKS carbine that took it from me.”

“Oh? And yes, that would have been a fitting story for a work of such caliber, indeed.”

“No such luck for my bespoke signed *Deaths and Entrances*. I lost it in a game of gin rummy. Wasn’t thinking and pledged it against a bet, and you know what they say—a bet is a bet.” He cleared his throat of the scratchy discomfort of his revelation.

Valery could not contain her laughter. “Please forgive me for laughing at your act of savage literary sacrilege, Cyrus, but for Heaven’s sake, in future you really must stick with the bullet story! It will buy you *much* more sympathy than the truth.”

He lit up a cigarette and sat on her couch as she sat in the alcove near her bedroom which was her office and skillfully typed out her review of another local play. “I’ll never understand deadlines,” he said after about ten minutes of listening to her type at her desk.

“Huh?” she said from her alcove.

“I said: ‘You’re beholden to a clock,’” he replied playfully. “A self-employed clock-watcher.”

After half an hour, Valery came into the living room with a pile of papers. She quickly checked for typos and sent the fax.

“Deadlines are part of everyone’s life, Cyrus,” she finally responded to his earlier comment. “Even *you* have a deadline. Exactly like the rest of us do. It’s just *hidden* from sight.”

“How so?”

“If you don’t paint *soon*, then it’s curtains, isn’t it?” she asked. The article had been sent and she tossed the pages into the trash. “I told Dwight a fib at The Cup: I *did* write a *stellar* review of his play this late in its season—just wrote it now, in fact, so it was only a *little* white fib—and that’s what I just faxed off. So that’s *Hemingway’s Wastebasket* in Rockford’s *Wastebasket*,” she joked as the last page settled. “No more with a nice apartment with a private balcony, if you don’t meet *your* deadline.”

“I suppose you *could* say I have some sort of deadline,” he agreed, “but you certainly won’t find me faxing a painting to my agent or shooting the shit on a cell phone just to feel and look busy and purposeful like some feckless stock trader. I’ll give it to him in a damned restaurant across a table with a handshake.”

“Aren’t *you* in a piss-poor mood?” she said, grinning.

“I’m just kind of feeling like there’s a pendulum swinging sharply above me, like Poe’s tormented prisoner,” he admitted. He turned on her television with the remote, flicked through a few channels, and turned it off. “Under the crushing urgency of time. But I hesitate to be homogenized into a calendar square to stop the menacing swing of the blade.”

He brushed her curls and kissed her lips gently. He felt a stir inside him, and while it was not a crashing wave against his chest, his pulse raced enough that he felt more authentically in the moment with her than he had the night before. He would put aside thoughts of deadlines for one night with her, whatever it meant to *them*, and let her be his lifeline before it would be time for him to fly to New York and be amongst the mourners.

“Ah, Cyrus. You make a better painter and bed partner than a social critic, I’m afraid. And apparently you’re shit at gin rummy. We can’t *all* be Bohemians, burning our canvas for a little flicker of heat on a winter night, now, can we? Now, how about a flicker of heat before you have to be off to New York?”

“I guess we can’t *all* be Bohemians,” he agreed as he took her outstretched hand and let her lead him into the bedroom and onto the slick silk sheets of her large brass-trimmed bed.

Greenwich Village, July 1994

The damnable racket of the airport was all that kept Drake awake enough to see his uncle approach him. He stood, reached to shake Andrew's hand, and tried to smile, but he knew that his smile didn't amount to much under his agony and stubble.

"You look like shit, Cyrus," Andrew remarked immediately. He tipped his glasses down. "Real shit. I'm sorry to be the one to have tell you."

Drake looked his uncle up and down and tapped his ash on the floor near the baggage conveyor. "Didn't catch so much as a *wink* on the flight," he explained. "Even in first class."

"No, I don't expect you did, by the looks of you," Andrew said. "Now, let's grab your bags and get you home so you can nod off—what say? And put that blasted cigarette out, would you? We're in an airport!"

Drake did as he was told. Eventually, he saw his only bag coming and reached to grab it. When Andrew saw which one he wanted, he reached out and took it for him. In no time at all, they were briskly walking outside in the huge parking lot. Andrew found his van and threw Drake's light bag in the back.

"We've got some other guests at the house," he informed Drake when they were about ten minutes into the drive.

Although Drake's eyes were blurry from lack of sleep, he could see that his father must have looked like hell before he died, since the two brothers were only five-and-a-half years apart and Andrew looked pretty leather-rough even without cancer. But he was still ox-strong and clarity in his eyes and his voice as crisp as freshly turned page. Drake lit a cigarette and took a drag; it tasted good and brought with it that old familiar rush.

“Can you stop by a store on the way so I can pick up a pack of butts? And I’ll ask now... may I smoke in your home?”

Andrew pulled over to a small store almost immediately and Drake went in and bought a pack of Camels, a copy of *The New York Times*, and a new lighter.

“Did you have that much trouble setting up things in San Francisco to get here so fast?” Andrew asked as Drake got back into the van. “And yes, if you must, please feel free to smoke inside. Though I suggest not blowing it in our guests’ faces.”

“Valery, a good friend of mine, agreed to apartment sit for me while I’m here,” he replied as he lit his second cigarette of the day with his new lighter. He’d set the flame too high, and it nearly burned his eyelashes. “My agent advanced me some money against my next sales. The flight here and open return were his gift to me.”

“How goes your career, anyway?” Andrew asked. He started the van with a twist of his wrist and pulled out into traffic almost immediately afterward.

Drake knew that Andrew was probably not at all interested in the artist’s life that had pulled his brother’s only child out of New York, but he figured he might as well answer the question. “I’ve been doing well enough, all told,” he said. With a few quick movements, he had the newspaper open to the classified section and he was looking through the obituaries. “Is Father in here?”

“Ansel was in yesterday’s edition,” Andrew replied. “I have a copy at home if you’d like to read it.”

“I would,” Drake answered solemnly. “Wasn’t he a Mason of some sort or another?”

“Damn shame you only come back after all these years like a bat out of hell for his kick-off parade.” Uncle Andrew had always had a way of mixing metaphors. “The Freemasons paid for his obituary, actually, in memory of all his charitable deeds during his time with them. At least that’s what they said in the obit they wrote about him.”

“So what’s this about guests?” Drake changed the subject.

“A whole herd of them,” Andrew said, not for a moment taking his gaze from the street ahead of him.

“Some Iranian friends of your father.” *Eye-rain-yun*, he said.

“Iranian?” *Ee-rân-ee-ân*, Drake said.

“Well, German citizens now, I guess, but, you know, like your mother, from Iran.”

“What’s their family name? I don’t know of any German-Iranians.”

“Damned if I can pronounce it, Cyrus. Let’s see, sounds a bit like *A-rash* something.”

“*Arashpour?*” It had been a long time since he’d heard that name. The Arashpour family had been friends of his mother, not his father.

“Yes, guess that’s it. They were in New York of all places on *completely* unrelated personal business from Heidelberg when they up and gave me a call to talk to your father and found out then that he’d passed away. They hadn’t lost touch after all these years, which is how they knew where to call. They’ve stayed on, and I didn’t have the heart to not invite them to be my guests—it makes for a tight squeeze.

“God, Cyrus, you look so damned tired from the flight. You ought to catch some sleep as soon as we get to the house.”

“Jet lag doesn’t usually hit me until the next day,” Drake returned. His cigarette had gone out.

“You’d think you’d flown to London, England to visit the Queen the way lag hits you.”

Drake hadn’t seen the place for years, and his eyes were half-closed when they arrived, but he didn’t want to open them fully to look. Andrew took him by the arm, led him through the townhouse quickly, and pulled him upstairs to the attic, where the cot that would be his bed was set up.

“Get as much sleep as you need,” he said as he threw a blanket over Drake.

As he drifted into the waves of sleep, Drake thought he saw his mother’s ghost standing at the shore of the Caspian, dressed in black and wearing a heavy veil, but it occurred to him that she had never worn black. It was then that he remembered he had caught a glimpse of a figure dressed in black at the side of the landing of the stairs to the attic.

A ghost at the bottom of the stairs? Mother? Here, among the noise and the smog and the crime and the stairs?

When Cyrus Drake awoke the next morning, he was cold, wet with perspiration, and alone. It was not the loneliness that came with solitude, but the feeling of being without a foundation, as he had felt for some time after his mother's death in Iran. His eyes opened and he found himself staring at an unfamiliar ceiling, overcome by foreign smells.

There was the smell of perfume and stale cigarette smoke. Some of the perfume was on his shirt collar and brought back to mind his final embrace with Valery Rockford as she'd dropped him at the airport, but that was not the only perfume he could detect. A minute later, he remembered that he was on a cot in his uncle's attic in Greenwich Village. When he got his bearings, he sat up in the cot, reached into his pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it. It tasted good and brought some warmth into him. The distinct smell of the brand cleared the air of the perfume almost immediately.

A glance to his left brought the cedar chest into view. He remembered this chest well since it had belonged to his father and he'd seen it almost every day in his childhood, in the corner of the salon with a Persian tapestry draped over it. Draped over the chest now was a neatly folded black suit and a pressed Oxford shirt, and he remembered at the sight of these clothes that his purpose for being in New York was to attend his father's funeral. Finishing his cigarette, he got out of bed, removed the clothes he had traveled and slept in, and started putting on the mourner's suit. The clothes smelled of the same perfume he had noticed upon waking, and it was then that he realized it was not perfume at all, but Andrew's cologne.

Once he'd done up his last shirt button, he looked down at the chest, bent over, and ran his hand over the smooth brass latch on its front. It bore no lock, but Drake knew what he would find inside if he opened it—black-and-white photographs from his years of childhood in Tarsdejh—so he waited a minute before loosening the latch and pulling up the top. He was a painter, but he had a nose as keen as his eyes, and as he opened the chest, he could tell by the smell alone that the chest had not been opened for years.

As he'd guessed, the trunk was filled with photo albums. He dared open the cover of one just long enough to see a photograph of his grandmother, a square-faced woman with a veil over her pitch-black hair. She was holding him up on her shoulder as she sat on a swinging seat in front of the Hayadarzadeh villa in Tarsdejh. Far off in the background stood a woman with his mother's face, and that was enough for him to close his eyes and shut the chest with a quick snap. He had seen enough and did not want to look deeper into the past than he had already. Without looking at the chest again, he folded his sweaty clothes, put them in a neat pile on his cot, and went downstairs.

"Everyone else already left," Andrew said from the small kitchen table across from the landing of the attic stairs.

Drake could smell his uncle's cologne and the fragrance reminded him to ask if he could use some for himself.

"Sure!" Andrew said, pointing at what Drake remembered to be the bathroom door. "How about you give yourself the once over with a razor? There're some disposables behind the mirror."

Drake went into the bathroom, turned on the sink so that the water was almost scalding hot, but not quite, and looked up at his face in the tiny, wood-framed mirror. He looked old, and he knew it, and there was no comfort in it for him to know how old he looked; it was an empty, not wise age. He lit a cigarette and held it skillfully in his mouth with his lips as he cut away two-or-three-days' worth of stubble with the new razor. The sharp freshness of the lemon-scented shaving cream overpowered the stench of his cigarette and pinched his nostrils.

"What time we got to be there?" he called out to Andrew.

"Half an hour yet," Andrew replied. "Don't cut yourself, now. Take your time."

Just as Andrew said this, Drake nicked his chin and the blood flowed down from him into the swirling pool of foamy, steaming water in the chipped porcelain sink underneath.

“Damn!” he hollered.

“Get yourself?” Andrew asked.

“For Christ’s sake!” Drake replied, wiping the cream and blood and flicking it into the sink. “I’m usually far more careful with....”

“Fathers don’t usually die. Just *once*. You’ve got your mind on other things. Just clean it up and we’ll be on our way.”

Andrew’s reminder about the death brought Drake back to himself. He splashed a few handfuls of hot water onto his face, patted himself with cologne, and put a tiny piece of toilet tissue on the cut to soak up the blood. A few brisk strokes of a wet comb later, he was at the front door and ready to go.

As Andrew drove the van, Drake went over some questions in his head and finally asked Andrew what had been on his mind since the airport the night before. “What kind of service will it be, exactly?”

“Catholic.”

This news hit Drake harder than he’d have guessed it would. “Catholic? But we’ve already determined he was a Freemason.”

“You know, Roman Catholic. As in Pope Pius and such. Of course, the Pope won’t be there, but—”

“He wasn’t Catholic, Roman or otherwise,” Drake replied. “It doesn’t make sense.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest and for the first time in two days, he felt fully awake.

“He’s been a Catholic for some time. As a man gets older,” Andrew tried to explain, “he comes to see God in *many* things.”

“Now we’re going to talk religion?” Drake poked as Andrew negotiated a quick turn.

“No, your father wasn’t a *religious* man, as you know, but you have been away for a *very* long time, Cyrus. There comes a time in a man’s life when the air rushes into his lungs a bit more slowly and there is no alternative but to find answers and God is the only one in whom he can confide his fears.”

Andrew’s words had become too muddled in Drake’s head for him to make any real sense of what he was hearing. “I see,” he said at last. “He sold out, then.”

“Basically,” Andrew returned with a soft laugh. “I guess that’s one way of putting it. The Masons and the Catholics can be like oil and water, I agree. He became closer to the Church as he grew more and more sick. I guess the Freemasons offered him no comfort at the level of his *soul*. If he sold out before signing out, then at least he did them in the right order. He was given the last rites on his deathbed and died with a clean conscience before God. His charitable work with the Freemasons gave him a clean conscience before mankind, considering his military career.”

Drake nodded his somber acknowledgment. They were quiet for the rest of the trip to Saint Jude’s. He then asked who would be attending the funeral.

“Mostly old vets come to pay their last respects, and a few Lodge members,” Andrew replied.

“How many of us can claim to have been end-to-end in three theatres all in a single career?” Drake emphasized his father’s military history in the form of a question. “He had a way of being in the thick of things.”

“You did your share of duty,” Andrew replied. “But yes, he had a knack for running headfirst into havoc, as much as he was for the peace to read a good book of poetry and play his horn.”

Drake had not forgotten that his father had been a soldier before all else, and he knew it was fitting that a soldier would be honored by his fellows in a foreign church and sent to rest with an equally foreign God. His father had never spoken much about his time in Spain as a neutral observer except to say that he chased the action and kept his eyes and ears open at all times. A few of the conversations he had overheard just before Ansel had volunteered for Korea told of his route-surveying work keeping the Persian Corridor running smoothly, but Ansel Drake *never* expounded upon what his special knack meant in real terms, a verbal restraint Cyrus came to appreciate in his own time in Vietnam, during the early advisor period.

Once the two men were at the funeral, the coffin came out closed, draped in white cloth, and it was then that Drake *knew* his father was dead. As Father Williams conducted the ritual of last respects for Mr. Drake, Cyrus Drake looked up and down the pews of the small church. From where he was, far in the back left, he could see almost everyone.

Mostly, he saw old men and women. Far on the right side of the church sat what he knew to be the Iranians. He did not recognize the Arashpours, it had been so many years since he'd seen them, but he knew Iranians well enough to single them out. They sat on either side of a Persian woman, who, unlike everyone else, was dressed entirely in white. Also unlike everyone else, her gaze was not held forward on the closed casket, but instead, she was looking straight at him and smiling slightly. Drake tapped Andrew's shoulder and leaned to whisper in his ear. "Are *they* the Arashpours?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the one in white?"

"Salomeh," Andrew returned. "Their granddaughter."

Drake didn't bother Andrew again but instead chose to return the younger Arashpour's stare as Father Williams went on about the achievements of the deceased. Finally, the eulogy came to an end, the top half of the casket was propped open, and a procession of old soldiers marched down the aisle of the church. One by one, they saluted Drake's deceased father, as fierce-looking as if they had served with him in France or Korea, but Drake knew they were probably paying their general respects as soldiers, rather than honoring specific loyalties. At last, the procession was over, and Drake stood to approach for his own last moment with his father. He noticed that the Arashpours and their granddaughter also stood.

The twenty-six steps down the aisle of Saint Jude's were the heaviest he'd ever taken. When he at last arrived at the open coffin, he did not at first look down, but instead chose to salute his father. He stood at rigid attention, raised his right hand in as crisp a salute as he could manage with his now atrophied painter's hand, and held his salute for a full minute. There was something inside him, perhaps his tour of duty in Vietnam, that permeated his understanding of *just* how rare a rarity it was to be giving this salute of utmost respect to a man as old as his father, having survived three of the century's most egregious conflicts.

As he finally looked down at the made-up face of his father, he saw more than the man. The last funeral he had been to was that of his mother when he was still a boy in Tarsdejh. He saw some of his mother's face, too; Death makes equals of all.

He turned to face the crowd. Somehow, for a brief moment, his cynicism and dark humor drifted from him and he just *felt* his father's death, like a tremor that every soldier ever held in a salute knew could not be allowed to reach the fingers, but burned to shake from deep down a melted arm, without his usual layers of obfuscating emotional embellishment and the polished brass holding closed his spectral cloak. Although it had not been in the program, he closed his eyes, and conjured up from within his once avoided memories of poems he had tried to write in off moments while in Vietnam the poem "These Old Soldiers," and recited it solemnly:

Grey-white berets, sky-marching, earth aflame,
With shrill cries over cold-world heads, they came;
On sand castles, sea salt, and spume, we tread,
Leaving behind the living and the dead.

Forgotten by the lark, the rook stands still,
As the old remember, on wheat-clad hill,
Bearing the ashes, names, the deepest part,
Year by year with "Death is *no more* our Art."

These old soldiers, through all their time Hell-spent,
Tell tales of earth that quaked, of hearts that rent,
Came home to *laugh*, to *love*, to *cry*, to *fret*,
Ensuring that those gone, *we* would *ne'er* forget.

When Drake fell silent, Andrew approached him, his eyes welled up with tears from the unexpected memorial his nephew had just delivered to everyone, and then the Arashpours followed suit. Drake watched from where he was standing at the side of the church as Salomeh bowed her head and turned to look at him. Dressed all in white as she was, she looked to Drake like an angel of mercy—a single dove amongst rooks.

The last of the mourners eventually proceeded out of the church and left Drake, Andrew, the Arashpours, and the priest standing around the casket.

"It was his time," Father Williams said as he closed it. "Time for him to walk with the Lord."

“Yes,” Andrew added, “it was. He lived a *full* life.”

“A full life,” Mehrdad Arashpour added with a thick German accent. “It has been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“*Baleh*,” was all that Drake could muster: *yeah*. He had only spoken with the Arashpours in Persian while in Iran, so it came to him more naturally to say *yes* in that language, even after so many years.

“You speak Farsi?” Salomeh asked in clear Persian. It was the first time Drake had heard a sound from her, and it served to remind him that she was indeed flesh and blood, not an angel of mercy.

“That’s one thing I’ve never let myself forget over all the years,” Drake replied in his clearest Persian. He wondered if it was a good time to be proud of his mixed heritage, at the funeral of his father.

He did not want to stay and talk, so he quickly walked up the aisle, out the front door, and over to Andrew’s van. The others followed eventually, and he watched Salomeh as she got into her grandparents’ rented car.

“She’s absolutely *astounding*,” Drake said to Andrew as he approached, almost surprised that the words left his mouth.

“Who that?” Andrew replied. “Mrs. Arashpour?”

“Salomeh.” He quickly pulled out a fresh cigarette and lit it. “Astounding.”

“A very nice family, all told,” Andrew returned, nodding his agreement at the same time. “How about the service though? Dignified or what? And by the way, that poem you recited. Thank you for that. Thank you so much.”

“Yes, they are a lovely family,” Drake replied, his gaze still on the white figure of Salomeh. “The service was fitting. I honestly haven’t been to all that many in my time. In ‘Nam, a ‘funeral’ was a bullet, some tags, and a body bag. Didn’t much care for death rituals after that.” He cleared his throat audibly.

“But you did Father’s life and legacy proud today,” he added with his deepest sincerity. “I know that he and I were distant, but he was a very good man and you brought that all together today.”

“How did today’s service compare with your mother’s?” Andrew asked as he opened the door to the driver’s side. “Ansel never attended that, or he’d have described it for me, I’m sure.”

Drake thought about his uncle's question a while before replying, "I'd rather not talk about that."

Andrew opened the door on Drake's side to let him in, and when Drake was at last belted in, he said, "Maybe one day you *will* rather. Your father carried the guilt of having gone to Korea and then, when getting a compassionate discharge to come back to you was *denied*... well, he carried the guilt over your mother's fate and your abandonment to today's grave. Have to wonder if the *real* reason he converted to Catholicism was to get those last rites at the end so he could be with her again. Ansel's the one who hand-picked the Donne sonnet printed in the memorial program. His last *breath* was: 'Death, be not proud.'"⁸

Andrew looked at Drake as they were stopped at a red light and finally repeated, "So maybe one day, Cyrus, you *will* rather."

Drake shook as if cold for minutes, but was not cold, and was silent for the entire time it took to drive back to the townhouse. When they arrived, he noticed that the Arashpour's car had not come yet. He quickly got out and rushed to the door. Andrew followed him to the door and opened it with his key.

"There's plenty of food in the refrigerator if you're hungry," Andrew said as he hung his key on a hook beside the door.

"How about you, Andrew?" Drake asked. "Would you like a sandwich or something?"

"Sure, thanks," was the reply.

⁸ "Holy Sonnet X"

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

—John Donne (1633)

Drake went into the kitchen and found the things to make the sandwiches. When he was done, he cut them into halves and put one on a plate for his uncle.

Andrew finally came into the kitchen and the two of them ate their lunch and drank coffee without saying much to one another. Drake could still feel the effect of changing time zones and he wanted to nap. The tiredness went deep into his bones. "I'll be having a nap upstairs," he finally said. He gathered the cups and plates and put them in the sink.

"You deserve it," Andrew said as Drake made his way up the stairs. "And again, thank you for that poem. I meant more than I can say. I'm sure it would have meant to world to Ansel, as well, knowing how he felt about these things."

Once in the attic, Drake felt conspicuous and uncomfortable in the clothes his uncle had loaned him for the funeral, so he took everything off but his shorts and went to sleep on the cot.

His dreams were of being a boy on the shores of the Caspian. He saw his mother standing against the backdrop of the sea as she walked closer to him, almost close enough for him to see her face; the sea slowly became an attic wall, and his mother's apparition slowly became Salomeh Arashpour.

“Good evening,” Salomeh Arashpour said to Drake from where she stood near the attic door. She was dressed entirely in black now and her makeup had been laid on a bit more than it had been earlier that day: her lips were a deep shade of red. Drake knew the look from the illustrated books of Persian verse he often read. She was the *Sâqi*.⁹ Her blouse held tightly to her body, so that her line awoke whatever healthy fire inside him that had managed to not be swallowed by his emptiness.

“Are you a dancer?” he finally managed to ask as he slowly pushed himself to a sitting position. It had been a long time since Valery Rockford, his only lover for the last six years, had been able to stir him profoundly, touching him deep inside where the cold ached. As he wobbled in the cot he wondered if it was only her vibrancy that stirred him, or if it was some other essence of her that was putting the dross in his veins to quicklime.

“Did Herr Drake tell you I’m a dancer? How did you know?” she said in English with a strongly German accent.

He pulled his blanket up as high as he could manage in an effort to cover the arousing effect she’d had on him. “Let’s just say that I’ve known my share of dancers in my time,” he replied, enigmatically. “Which inclined me to ask if you’re one.”

⁹ *Sâqi* (lit. “wine-pourer”) In Persian poetry, the wine-pourer is much like a Western muse, but often assumes a more metaphysical role as one who pours ecstatic, divine joy into the very essence of the poet beyond mere inspiration to write verse. The *sâqi* has a gender-neutral role, being portrayed as suits the poet, thus giving poets wider freedom to explore their mystic ascension in a way that transcends sexuality or gender-roles, essentially making them poststructuralist precursors to expressive creativity and hierarchical and binary deconstruction.

“Do you know so *many* dancers you can spot one on sight?” she said in Persian. “I know enough about men to know what I just saw.”

Her Persian was easier for him to understand fluently than her strongly accented English, but for reasons as old as his mother’s death, Drake no longer wanted to speak Persian or hear it spoken; he almost wanted to be in the moment. “I used to paint dancers a lot in my early career. I’ve seen *dozens* of them walk about in their day-to-day lives. You all seem to stand a certain way, and I know what to look for, I guess.”

“Yes, you are a painter. What *else* do you know about *me* from bouncing around with these dancers? Dozens did you say? Any *more* assumptions you feel ready to expound upon?”

“Nothing more than that,” he admitted with a dry chuckle.

“That’s good. We *do* have a club agreement not to reveal *all* our secrets to painters ogling us with their graphite, you know. We like our secrets as much as every other esoteric order.”

“Would you mind turning around while I dress, Salomeh?” he asked, suddenly ashamed of himself in a way he hadn’t expected to be. He looked at his wristwatch, saw that it was ten past nine, and wondered what she was doing up in the attic so late into the evening.

“Are you so modest?”

Drake stood, fully in view, and started dressing. “Your call,” he mumbled as he fumbled with his pants. “No time for games.”

She finally turned her head, obviously amused, while he finished dressing.

“Sure, stay for the main act, and *then* turn your head!” he laughed. Drake could sense that her attitude was of someone who was playing with him, and he was somewhat shocked that he was playing back. She had already messed with his hormones just by being who she was, and wondering what her play was took away some of his anger.

Salomeh approached the wooden chest, swung it open, and started to sift through its contents.

“My grandparents are escorting me to my dance school,” she replied. She flipped a pack of cigarettes from her blouse pocket, popped out a stick, and offered it to Drake. “How about a cigarette?”

Drake took the offered smoke and let her light it for him. Her arms were smooth. Her fingers were delicate. Her fingernails were perfectly groomed.

“I have been accepted at Elysium College for their MFA in Dance. I wish to transition from dancing to choreography.”

“Well! My hearty congratulations on Elysium. That’s *quite* a career accomplishment to get in there,” he said. “Why are you up *here*, though?” he asked.

“Pardon?”

“What are you doing in the attic? My *de facto* bedroom?”

“I wanted to wake you up and give you a stir.”

“You succeeded. Anything else?”

“Well,” she said, blowing a robust smoke ring as she walked towards him, “I had something more in mind than just a *stir*. I saw the way you looked at me at the funeral,” she added.

“And?”

She was now very close to him and he could smell her. He knew that he shouldn’t be standing so closely to her, in a dimly lit attic, with the door open, with everyone downstairs and able to come upstairs at any minute, but something inside him, the new heat, didn’t care.

Her arm slid around him, pulling him in. She was shorter than he was, but like a dancer, stood on point and kissed him on his lower lip, then bit it. The wiser parts of him wanted him to turn his head he did not want to do that. The warmth of the touch of her against his chest, her smell, the taste of her—he gently bit back and was lost to her tow.

Like the *first* first kiss, heat and shivers shot in the hair on the back of his neck as she searched her mouth with his. It took some of his pain away. Pain. It had only felt like *emptiness* before. Now he knew it had been *pain*. He let his hand, still with a lit cigarette burning between his fingers, slide around her waist and he pulled her closer, higher, so their kiss was deeper. The kiss was not just her kiss, it was *their* kiss, whatever that meant in the there and then, neither hers nor his alone. He didn’t want her soft lips to leave his, the smoke of her last almost Eastern teahouse opium drag was pouring from both their nostrils. It had to end, but he did not want to be the one to end it, so he closed his eyes, and let their moment in the attic continue.

Drake went down no more than five steps before he heard the squeaking of the cedar chest being reopened. He was content not to stay and look into the past with Salomeh. When he finally arrived at the landing, he nodded to Andrew and the Arashpours, who were seated at the kitchen table.

“Cyrus,” Andrew said, almost as quietly as if he were talking to himself.

“*Salâm*,” the others said in unison.

Drake flushed his cigarette under the running water of the kitchen sink. He then turned to open the fridge and see what he could put together for a snack. He sat beside Badria Arashpour as he ate, noting the many differences in her appearance since he’d last seen her.

“So, you are a *painter*,” Mehrdad said.

“His father proudly followed all his achievements, and often said to me that there were many,” Andrew boasted.

“He did that?” Drake asked, almost choking on a mouthful of his hastily made chicken sandwich.

“One of the things he willed to you was the scrapbook he kept,” Andrew said quietly, more in the direction of the two Arashpours than Drake.

“I’ll be damned.”

“There are many things about his father that Cyrus doesn’t know,” Andrew chided. “He didn’t even know his father was a Catholic until this morning.”

“Oh, indeed. We have also followed your career, as much as we can from Germany. It sounds like you’ve been away from New York for many years, and Ansel converted since then?”

Badria asked her question with an understanding from once having closely known Ansel and Cyrus' relationship as father and son deeply concealed in her voice.

Instead of continuing to feel aggravated, Drake recited two lines he remembered from *The Syncopated Cup*: "... when we left the dens and torture chambers of adolescence—if we ever did (or do." After a long, deep sigh, he stood, went to the bottom of the stairs, and started to ascend. "Good night, everyone," he said. "I must retire for the evening." When he arrived at his cot, he noted that Salomeh must have descended downstairs without his having noticed. A fragment of one of Shakespeare's plays flashed before his inner vision:

Thou art not thyself;
For thou exist'st on many a thousand grains
That issue out of dust. Happy thou art not;
For what thou hast not, still thou strivest to get,
And what thou hast, forget'st. Thou art not certain;
For thy complexion shifts to strange effects,
After the moon. If thou art rich, thou'rt poor;
For, like an ass whose back with ingots bows,
Thou bearest thy heavy riches but a journey,
And death unloads thee.

[...]

Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But as it were an after-dinner's sleep
Dreaming on both, for all thy blessèd youth
Becomes as agèd and doth beg the alms
Of palsied eld; and when thou art old and rich,
Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb, nor beauty
To make thy riches pleasant. What's yet in this
That bears the name of life? Yet in this life
Lie hid more thousand deaths; yet death we fear,
That makes these odds all even.¹⁰

He fell into a near sleep, the taste of Salomeh's lips still on his, and the words of the play echoing in his mind's endless ear.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (Act III, Scene I)

His exhausted spirit drifted back to the old cedar chest he had avoided exploring with her. Given what his uncle had said about his father following his career with a scrapbook, he wondered about the many memories and mementos it contained, each one potentially holding a piece of his parents' lives that he had never known. It was a choice he had consciously made, electing to not dwell in the past. He asked himself in all perceived self-honesty if it was his father and mother's, or his *own* past that he feared finding in that coffer, inlaid not by delicate hands in antique lands, but by tours of duty and their ham-fisted consequences.

Slowly his oracle-mind again returned to Salomeh's kiss. The sound of her breath from her nostrils as they two became an entwined being in the ether not of nostalgia and recollection of heroes on their battlefields, but lovers reclined amongst the ruins Alexander the Great himself would have seen and known as set solidly in almost permanent place by his formidable Persian opposition, long before his charmed birth. His own breathing found a simpler rhythm, his thoughts slowly shimmered into a golden blaze suitable to admire the tapestry of his satisfied tranquility. This one kiss, this *first* first kiss, he wished to linger, and it did until he finally *truly* slept and was awash in the void.

The Monday following Drake's father's funeral, Mehrdad and Badria Arashpour returned to Heidelberg, Germany. Andrew and Cyrus drove to the New York International Airport in Andrew's van with all their luggage packed in the back, and the others drove in the Arashpours' rented car. When they arrived at the airport, Andrew checked their luggage for them as he had promised he would, and then sought them out in the crowd.

Drake immediately spotted Salomeh, since he only had to look for her black outline among the others. As soon as he saw the Arashpours, he waved.

"So, it's no trouble for Salomeh to stay on at your home, Herr Drake, and just until she finds her own place?" Mehrdad asked Andrew. "We had intended to get so much more done, but with the funeral, well...."

"No trouble at all!" Andrew replied, shaking hands with Salomeh's grandfather. "I've come to more fully understand how the Drakes and Arashpours go back generations, and it is my pleasure to host her for as long as she may need or wish to stay," he added. Drake was pleased that Andrew had made a proper effort to say their family name, an improvement since he had first tried to recall it for him.

"You promise, Cyrus, to help her finish up the registration process at Elysium?" Badria asked Drake when she was close enough that only he could hear her. "I cannot emphasize enough how much this means to her mother, myself, and Salomeh that nothing falls out of place. Elysium has been a dream for—"

“*Gorbân-et-am*,”¹¹ he replied as he hugged the old woman. He could not help but be reminded that his own mother would be as old as Badria Arashpour was now, had she lived. “I’ll bend over backwards to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

“*Sepas gozaram*,”¹² Badria replied.

“*Kharesh mikonam*,”¹³ Drake sealed the pact.

“I worry about her,” she said. “She is full of sour wine at times, but she is my only grandchild. The others....”

Drake knew from many years of experience what Badria had almost explained. “I will keep an eye out,” he said. “At least as long as I’m here in New York.”

“How long will you be?” Badria asked. She reached out her thin, weak arm and caressed Drake’s left cheek the way she had when he was a boy in Tarsdejh. Or had it been his mother who had caressed it that way? “In New York, I mean?”

“I have some estate matters to attend to,” Drake replied.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“A man is only as good as his word, Badria,” he said. He hugged her again and turned to her husband to shake his hand. “And you already have my word. You can rest absolutely assured that I will stay on until all of the matters of Salomeh’s education at Elysium are to your satisfaction.”

Badi kissed his cheek affectionately. “*Pesar-am*,”¹⁴ she said tenderly to him, tears welling in her eyes.

“It’s been too many years,” Mehrdad said.

“You’ll live a few more yet, *ensh-Allah*,” Drake said. “Have a safe journey. Give warmest regards to Soraya on my behalf.”

“Yes, Soraya will be so eager to hear about you,” Badria agreed. “If only it had been a happier reason to visit. Did I mention to you that she’s now the Clinic Director of Internal Medicine? Those two really did so well for themselves in their medical careers once we settled in Heidelberg. Maybe we can all keep in touch from now on and not have to catch up so rarely.”

¹¹ *Gorbân-et-am* (lit. “I am your sacrifice”) In this context, used as an oath underwriting a promise or commitment with personal honor, akin to saying, “I stake my life on [getting it done]” or “I’ll give [the matter] my all.”

¹² *Sepas gozaram* (lit. “I give thanks”) Formal mode of “Thank you.”

¹³ *Kharesh mikonam* (lit. “I ask”) Idiomatic formula meaning “My pleasure.”

¹⁴ *Pesar-am* (lit. “My son”)

“I agree we should,” Drake replied.

Finally, the goodbyes had been said and the Arashpours were off. Andrew suggested that the three who remained should eat something, and when everyone agreed, he suggested a café he knew on the way back to his townhouse.

Drake chose to sit in the back passenger seat of the van and Salomeh sat directly beside him. “What did my grandmother say to you back at the airport?” she asked in Persian.

“She asked me to *swear* that I would keep an eye on you,” he replied in English. He had heard too much Persian in the last few days and wanted to forget he knew the language.

“Look after me? I’m old enough to—”

“You’ll hardly know I’m there. I’m just riding shotgun for you until you’re all signed in at school,” he added. “For Badria.”

“Will you be my Ezrail?” she asked with a wicked smile on her lips.

“The Angel of Death? Is that *your* guardian angel, then?” he laughed. “You *do* intrigue me so.”

They arrived at John’s Café, and Andrew parked the van right in front and beckoned them to follow. Soon, they were all at a small table, leaning over hamburgers and greasy fries.

“Ansel and I came here once in a while,” Andrew finally said to break the silence that had grown between everyone at the table. “Nothing to shake a stick at, but it cures what ails you.”

“I think I have *finally* had the truly fabled American greasy spoon experience,” Salomeh said with a chuckle that made everyone laugh with her. “I understand why it’s called that now.”

“Say, Cyrus, have you given what I told you about your inheritance much thought?” Andrew jumped topics suddenly.

Drake had been chewing his burger when his uncle asked him this. “Huh?” he muttered with a full mouth.

“Your inheritance,” Andrew repeated. “You own half the townhouse now, and the other things I mentioned Saturday night. Have you thought about this any?”

“Some old photos and a scrapbook,” Drake said with a sigh when he swallowed his last mouthful. “A picture of a very old woman I don’t even remember, as she holds a two-year-old boy I don’t even remember having been, while sitting in front of a house I cannot even recollect.”

“Whatever it all amounts to, to you, I guess. Have you given any consideration to what you’re going to do with it all? I mean, when you go back to San Francisco, will you be wanting me to sell the townhouse so we can—”

“I can sign my half of the place over to you,” Drake hastily suggested. “You can have it all. That’s the right thing to do.” After he had said this, he thought about his dry spell, about the deadline he and Valery had talked about, and he wondered if he should be offering Andrew his half of a *prime* Greenwich Village townhouse. When the full weight of what he had said hit him, he almost choked on his dry throat.

“Couldn’t do that!” Andrew rescued him. “It’s *rightfully* half yours. To tell you the truth, I’ve bequeathed my half to you when I go anyway, and that won’t be in *too* many years.”

“Okay, Andrew, whatever you say. You can stay in it. I’ll just sign over one more percent to you, so you can do legal stuff without my consent, how’s that? Or maybe a power of attorney in matters related to the townhouse. Whatever you feel is best.”

“There’s money in your father’s bank account that will be coming to you, as well. And some financial instruments. Best not shuffle that aside, as it’s no small sum.”

“I haven’t given it much thought,” Drake admitted. “Give me a while to chew on it.”

“If it’s anything like this hamburger,” Salomeh threw in, “you’ll need a *long* while to chew on it!”

Everyone let go of the tension that talking about Drake’s father had built up by laughing in short bursts over Salomeh’s joke. When they all finished, Andrew paid for lunch and they were soon on their way.



Drake stayed in the attic, reading the book of poetry that Jules Hatchet had given to him until he finally fell asleep with the thin book open in front of him. The next morning, he ate breakfast, smoked almost a quarter-pack in the attic alone, and came downstairs. When he did descend, Andrew gave him the keys to his van so he could drive Salomeh to Elysium College.

“I’m really trying to figure you out,” Salomeh said in Persian as they drove. She had taken full envelope with her.

“And I am trying to figure you out, Salomeh. Why do you insist on speaking Persian when I always answer you back in English?” He flicked a lit cigarette back and forth in his mouth to be rid of the ash without reaching for the smoke.

“My English still feels very awkward when I speak and I don’t like feeling othered in a conversation,” she said.

“Fair enough. So, then, what can’t you figure out about me?”

“I feel I can be honest with you,” she began.

“Well, that kiss we shared in the attic should at least buy you that,” he interrupted.

“You’re a painter,” she explained as she reached over to take his smoke to start a burn on her own stick. “That makes you of the same fabric as I am.”

“You paint any?”

“No,” she replied, “but I dance. I paint with my body.”

Drake wondered what he would have been had he decided to paint with some other aspect of himself than he had. Finally, he said, “Okay, so be honest with me, already.”

“I’m afraid of *everything*,” she said at last.

“Well, that’s understandable at your age. What has it to do with what you cannot figure out about me?” he returned, his eyes still on the street signs that would eventually lead to her school.

“Why are *you* also afraid?” she asked. “I am afraid because I am twenty-three, in New York City. I know why I am afraid. I am a woman. I am going to be putting my art in front of those judges and I am going to be judged to the *core*. I have many hard years of work still ahead of me before I have what I came to have.

“You, on the other hand, are a man. And moreover, you are older, with the benefit of the lessons of those years, lived in the city before, with some years of success and artistic and critical judgment already *behind* you on the road, *conquered*. I’ve talked with your uncle and looked through the scrapbook of your father, and yet, I still cannot discover why *you* are afraid, Cyrus Drake. You have already, in full golden glory, crossed *your* Rubicon, and all of Rome is yours, O King. Do I have this angst you seem to bear like a holy duty to look forward to? I was hoping to lose my fears, not be as afraid as *you* are now when I am your age.”

“I’m not *that* old. Or that *wise*, I’m honest enough to say.”

“Well, you know what I mean. You’re well *established*.”

Drake thought for a long while before answering her, and when he finally did, he knew it was not enough for her curious mind. “I am afraid of what I have *done*, not where I am *going*, or what I have so-called *achieved*.”

“*So-called* achieved?” she laughed. “The only thing worse than a sore loser, Cyrus, is a sore *winner*. That’s an unbecoming look of entitlement on you, given the *accolades* of your career. Show some grace, at the very least, to those who’ve praised you.”

Salomeh’s poke stung of the stark truth, but at least she did not ask, “What have you *done*?” and indeed, he was content that they did not talk to one another for the remainder of the drive. At Elysium College, they found the registrar’s office, where she confirmed her enrollment with the receptionist at the desk.

At the last minute, she asked if she could change her class selection slightly, and she and Drake then had to wait for a new curriculum assessment interview with an academic counselor. After about thirty minutes, she was called in and she motioned that she wanted Drake to come with her.

When it came time to discuss her desired electives, Salomeh suggested that she wished to explore the underlying core critical theory behind poststructuralist approaches to esthetic interplay, to better grasp the interdisciplinary underpinnings of her craft as a both creative and interpretive choreographer.

Her advisor, Kevin O’Toole, did a quick search through the catalogue and exclaimed, “You’re in luck. I always love luck like this. There’s this one—it’s very new but it’s got two semesters behind it, even though it was brought in as an experimental elective—‘CT503: From Theory to Movement: Applying Hirsch and Barthes in Choreography.’ Are you at all familiar, Miss Arashpour, with either E. D. Hirsch or Roland Barthes?”

“Not by name,” she admitted.

Drake remembered his oath to Badria to help Salomeh get settled in, and seeing her interest, gently but actively added his thoughts on this. “This is *your* roster, but if I may... I taught them both in my day. Hirsch will thoroughly introduce you to authorial intention whereas Barthes will introduce you to the doctrine that the reader’s interpretation of a piece is central.”

Salomeh smiled appreciatively. “Thank you for clarifying. That really sounds exactly like something I *should* explore. Mr. O’Toole, *that*, please. And if I find it useful, we can maybe...”

“While in this program, Miss Arashpour, our entire Elysium graduate program catalog is at your disposal for one elective every semester if it suits your evolving vision for your success.”

Soon, all of her academic matters were in order.

O’Toole looked Drake in the eye before they had a chance to stand to leave and said, “Do I *know* you? You say you taught?”

“Many years ago. American Lit. Probably not that. Did you serve in ’Nam, maybe?” Drake answered.

“Yes, actually—good call—but that’s not it. You look *very* familiar.”

Salomeh began to say, “He’s Cyrus—”

“Drake!” the counselor exclaimed, hitting his head with the palm of his hand. He offered a handshake across from his desk. “That’s it! I remember your face from an art exhibit while I was doing a stint in San Francisco. Nice to meet you!”

“Pleasure’s all mine,” Drake returned, to be polite.

“You’re in New York these days?”

“Here for a funeral.”

“Oh, sorry to hear—”

“My father’s time had come,” Drake assured the man.

“Staying on long?”

“Don’t know, really,” he replied. It was true—he did not know how long he would stay in New York.

“Say, you’re some commodity. I *loved* that exhibition. I was on at another art college over there.”

“Teaching?” Drake asked, to sound as if he were interested.

“No, no. Doing the same thing I do here. Curriculum stuff.”

“I found that teaching wasn’t what it was cracked up to be, anyway,” Drake added.

“Totally put you off pedagogy, did it?” The counselor’s face seemed to wear a different mask at this point in the conversation.

“It felt at the time like just some stuff I did to fill days and weeks and months while I tried to find my legs again, after Vietnam,” Drake admitted. “At the end of the day, I gave it up to go to San Francisco and squander my life on art. From what you’ve said, it seems you know a little of *that* part of my story.”

The conversation went back and forth a little while longer. There was something about the way Salomeh Arashpour looked right through Drake during the conversation, something so much more real than the way Valery Rockford had ever looked at him.

They left Kevin O'Toole's office and found Andrew's van. He turned to glance at her once in a while as he drove, just long enough to see that she was peeking over at him as often as he was at her. She had been right, but he did not know why he was afraid, or what it was exactly that he feared. He eventually dared speak to her.

"I was quite surprised and pleased about your choice of elective," he said.

"It's an area I've been meaning to tackle more fully since touching upon it during my Bachelor of Fine Arts studies," she replied. "From what I've read about *your* work, the literary analysis approach to your painting career has served you well, so I figured it might finally be worth investigating now that it might make a difference to something other than my imagination. I was not familiar with those two names, however, as getting access to that at an academic level in Heidelberg in a dance-focused program was just not something within the mandate of the program. I sort of ended on Derrida and just put it aside."

Drake drove on, fully unprepared to reply to her explanation, caught in an undertow of quiet astonishment at both Salomeh's approach with him and at the breadth and clarity of her refreshing authenticity. After five minutes of silence, he found words again.

"From what I can tell, you seem to have done a great deal of looking into my career and its details. It sounds as though you've likely summarized it in list form and put it into the kinds of boxes my agent has," he began. "But I must ask... whatever for?"

"Just as you have known your share of dancers," she began to explain, "I have known a few painters."

"And what has that told you about—"

"Whereas you looked at me when you first saw me in the attic through memories of other dancers," she interrupted him, "I prefer to learn about you through actually trying to figure out who *you* are, not some *other* people I think I remember more than I actually do." She smiled. "So I did a bit of research, I admit." The two were silent for the rest of the drive to Andrew's.

The next day, Drake carefully sorted through those of his father's personal papers that had been willed to him. Besides the liquid funds in the savings account, he had been left stocks, annuities, and a great number of bonds. As he was adding up the numbers in the rows he had put the value of each, trying to figure out if he would be able to stay on at his San Francisco apartment without having to paint ever again after all, the phone rang.

Andrew quickly came from his room and answered it. "It's for you," he said, offering Drake the phone.

Drake had not given anyone his uncle's phone number and almost told Andrew to hang up, but he walked over instead and put the receiver to his ear.

"Cyrus Drake speaking," he said.

An unfamiliar voice answered. "Hello, Mr. Drake. You don't know me. My name is Charles Tennyson."

"Hello," Drake replied. "How may I help you, and if I may ask, how did you know where to phone me?"

Tennyson laughed at this. "I apologize that I am calling you at this number. An acquaintance of mine gave it to me. We've all been around the block enough times to know how these things play out. I heard it on the grapevine. How about let's leave it at that? I simply absolutely did *not* want to miss my chance."

"You have me at a significant disadvantage, Mr. Tennyson. Miss your chance to *what*?" Drake asked. Andrew returned to his room, and he didn't know where Salomeh was in the house. He sat on the small stool under the wall-mounted phone and listened for a reply.

"My chance to offer you a position," was the reply.

“To which position would we be referring?” Drake pressed.

“Well, I’m the Director of HR at the Park West Academy of Modern Visual Art. Due to an upcoming departure, we have an opening for a Senior Artist-in-Residence. You can imagine, then, Mr. Drake, that when I learned *you* were in New York...”

“Park West’s reputation is *strong*,” Drake commented. “So you want me on the faculty? That’s what this is all about?”

“To be honest, your name would pull some of the country’s best student and staff prospects into our fold. It’s a somewhat forward-facing situation. At least at the brochure level.”

Drake wanted to laugh but restrained himself. “My brand aside, you do know that my actual *formal* qualifications are a Bachelor’s in English Literature and an MFA in the same, right? And let’s not mince words: it’s been many *years* since I taught American Lit. I think Adam audited a few of my classes on the *opus* of Mark Twain seen through a postmodern lens. I can smell the naphthalene from the mothballs on my professor jacket as we speak. I’m just letting you know that I’m a bit out of the loop.”

“As Senior Artist-in-Residence, all of your course plans are *entirely* up to *your* standards and discretion. We want you for your well-deserved reputation as a contemporary American painter, Mr. Drake. The qualifications issue is *just* for a paper trail. Your body of work speaks for you.”

“Fine then, let’s call the matter of my degrees settled. Senior Artist-in-Residence, yes? What are the perks?” he asked.

“The actual salary is out of my hands, and it’s probably not what you’d want given your tier, really, to be honest, *but* there is one really *great* perk. Fucking *astounding* one, truth be told. The Senior Artist-in-Residence gets a fully-furnished condo near the MoMA while under contract with the Academy if they want. If not, then there’s a combination of smaller perks.”

“How near to the MoMA? Short subway trip?”

“Everything’s cozy and adjacent. It’s the Plaza District. It’s a half-hour stroll through Central Park from home to work every day, and a half-hour jaunt back home.”

Drake held back a choking sound. The idea of moving to a ready-to-inhabit condo in the historic Plaza District *immediately* appealed to him, but he asked for some time to think the offer over. He took down Tennyson’s phone number and hung up.

Half an hour of thinking later, he picked up the phone and called his apartment phone in San Francisco.

“Collect call from Cyrus Drake,” the automated operator announced when the receiver was picked up at the other end.

Valery accepted the charges. “Cyrus! How are things with you over there in New York?” she asked immediately. “Pray tell, so I can stop worrying about you here at my end.”

“The funeral was peaceful,” Drake said.

“When are you coming back?” Valery pressed.

“That’s what I’m phoning about. How are you liking the apartment?” he asked.

“It’s great! So much better than my—”

“You *want* it?”

“What?”

“Do you want to take over my lease? I can buy you out of yours if it isn’t month-to-month.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“I’ve been offered a position on the faculty at an art college,” he explained. “One of the frills of the gig is a furnished flat near the MoMA. Park West Academy.”

“Wow, Park West. *Sweet*. A condo near the MoMA?”

“Furnished, near there. Plaza District.”

“Just *wow*, my friend. That’s *quite* a development.” Valery was silent for a time, and then said, “Just remember, though: wither thou goest, thither thou art...”

“Right, right. This is no geographical cure. You’re talking to a globetrotter, Valery. I learned *that* life lesson. I’ve achieved enough already and need some material stability. Time to cash in on my brand a little and drift a while. Make room for the next wave of turps surfers.”

“How’s the cash? What are they offering you nice enough to have *deadlines* to worry about?” There was a certain glee in her voice as she hit the word *deadlines*.

“I don’t know *yet* and I didn’t really *ask* after learning about the condo. At least I’ll have a *nice* roof over my aching head. I’m assuming it will keep me in a pack or two and an occasional lunch or dinner out with friends.”

“What about *me*?” she pouted. “You know you have *always* been my *preferred* port of call.”

“You know if I could push a button and you’d be living somewhere near here, I’d *do* it, in an instant,” Drake said. “I’m quite fond of you as well, Valery.”

She was silent for a long while, and then said, “I’ve given that talk we had about ‘screwing and eating’ to the exclusion of all else quite a bit more thought than I ever knew I had in me.”

“I remember *that* conversation. It seems we had that talk only *last weekend*. Where *has* the time gone?” Perhaps she heard the affection in his voice as he gently teased her.

“So I had a little discussion about our whole *thing* with some girlfriends of mine at *my* watering hole, and one of my friends, Gwyneth, says to me, ‘It sounds like what you two have is a mutual pact of frank sexual bartering that works *so* well for you *both* that you’ve put off making real decisions about your *actual* love lives,’” Valery related. “What do you think about that? Did we prevent one another from something more...?”

Drake inhaled and exhaled before replying to her question, after considering it sufficiently, given he *had* almost asked her to move in. “Perhaps we *did* do that,” he began. “That’s alright, really, though, don’t you think? Didn’t you say that it kept us... *kind*... that was it—it kept us *kind* to one another.”

She took her own deep breath and said, “And that can only be the best possible thing.” Drake could hear and recognize an aching in her voice unlike any he’d heard from her before.

“You and I have always been the *best* possible thing going in *all* of the San Francisco jazz cellar crowd, Val. Now, before we get all damp and misty and crash into a telephone pole, how about taking over that lease? You love the place; it’s *you*.”

“Are you sure about this, Cyrus? It could be complicated—and costly!—to change your mind a few months in.”

“I’m certain. Which is why I’m giving *you* my keys. You’ll have room for six more bookshelves. And glorious privacy.”

“I’m in,” she eventually replied.

“We’ll hammer out all the details, like my truck, later,” he said. “I’ve got to get back to Park West now,” he closed.

“Yes, we’ll figure it all out on paper later,” Valery Rockford said, in her usual, distant tone of self-certainty. “Good luck in New York, Cyrus. You deserve what you can get out of life. I’m only as far away as a phone call, any time.”

“And you. Thanks for the safe harbor, Starbuck,” he said before hanging up. He picked up the receiver and dialed Charles Tennyson. A receptionist answered and put him on hold. After three minutes of boring music, Tennyson came on the line.

“Charles Tennyson speaking.”

“This is Cyrus Drake.”

“You’ve thought about it already? A *quick* decision maker.”

“I don’t like to keep things waiting,” Drake said. He twisted about the stool, trying to find a comfortable position.

“And?”

“I’ll accept your offer on two conditions,” Drake replied.

“Great! The conditions are?” Drake could tell by the man’s voice that he was very tense at this point.

“Well, while I’m happy that it’s furnished to *start* with, I entertain at home on multiple tiers and I’ve got *very* particular tastes in interior décor and artwork, so I’m going to want to slowly adjust the vibrations as I settle in.”

There was a very brief pause. “Adjust? As in....?”

“New furniture a piece at a time, maybe more at a time. This means, in practical terms, that I will need a place to put the old items so that your property is kept safe.”

“Ah, yes, I see. We *can* store existing furniture and décor, such as any art or furniture that you don’t want, at the Academy if you decide to replace or remove a piece. Do you want an actual budget for new pieces, or would you plan to keep anything new you bring in? Just making sure we catch this on paper now.”

“I can cover that,” Drake clarified. “I’d own any new stuff.”

“Sounds good. Already done and typed in.” The sound of keyboard keys tapping came over the line clearly. “What’s your second talking point?”

“The contract should be locked in for two years, not just one, since I’m giving up San Francisco, with all of my network and connections there, and have to reboot that all here to keep my brochure face worth our mutual time. Need runway time.”

“Sure thing! I can assure you that I have the authority to agree on that point. Let’s say auto-renewal after two years, with the details, quotas, and provisos of that to be discussed and agreed upon mutually. The usual verbiage for such matters.” Drake could hear much bustling at Tennyson’s desk.

“Could you tell me more about the condo in particular?” he asked Tennyson. “Is it on a lease that might impact me?”

“This particular condo is held by Park West Academy as a permanent endowment that is encumbered by its original donor for use of the Senior Artist-in-Residence and direct family. We only have *one* such position, so as long as you stay on—however long that is—this is *your* home.”

“Wonderful,” Drake replied, secure in the contingency of his owning half the large townhouse with Andrew in the Village should he ever need a place. “Everything else you’ve said sounds good to me, so let’s say we get this in ink.”

“Where should I send the contract? After all, the term is about to begin, and I’d like you to sign on and get going quickly so we can include your name in our marketing materials. Sooner is better with this.”

“You have the phone number, but not the mailing address?” Drake teased.

“It seems my grapevine source gave me only your number,” he admitted.

Drake at this point realized that he had, in his dry angst about not having produced any new art for such a long time, completely forgotten about his agency agreement with Russ. “Also, I am represented by the Russell K. McGuire Agency in San Francisco. Any artistic output I produce considered of saleable caliber must be vetted by Russ McGuire.”

“We’ve had to deal with this kind of clause in the past. Of course, we will honor all your existing relationships, with agents or otherwise,” Tennyson agreed. “We’re on to getting the exact wording from Russel McGuire himself just as soon as you hear the phone go *click*.”

Drake hung up the phone.

“What was all that chatter about?” Andrew asked as he entered the kitchen. “Not like *you* to be talking up a storm on the phone. What did I miss?”

He explained to his uncle that he would be staying in the city as a college teacher. “They’ve offered me an apartment near the Museum of Modern Art,” he added. “It’s time for me to settle down for a bit. It’s looking like I’ll be in Manhattan for two more years at the bare minimum.”

“Took Ansel’s death to finally get you back here where you really belong,” Andrew observed dryly, “but it’s *good* to have you back, even if at arm’s length, Cyrus.”

He approached him and offered his hand in congratulations. “All those years you spent in California—and don’t get me wrong, I don’t begrudge you your happiness and career, and neither did your father—well, I didn’t even dare to wish you’d ever be back, to be honest.”

Drake shook his uncle’s offered hand, and then brought him in for a full hug. “The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.”

“Ah, yes,” Andrew returned, “but you can’t just cut the Bard off *there*, so simplistically: ‘The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together: our virtues would be proud, if our faults whipped them not; and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherished by our virtues.’”¹⁵

“Only *you* have the recall to call me on that, Andrew!” Drake said. Holding the financial papers he had been balancing before Tennyson’s call, he ascended into the attic. The annuities had generated enough for his father to retire on, since the townhouse was free and clear. These assets, with the new position’s salary, whatever it was, even with the IRS taking the vig, put him in a solid position to find his eyes and vision again, and it made him content to know that he had earned so much outward stability all at once without having to paint a single canvas to achieve it.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *All’s Well that Ends Well* (Act IV, Scene III)

Midtown Manhattan, August 1994

10

Drake sat at a small café table, drinking a cup of black coffee that had long since grown cold. He hated nothing more than cold coffee but pushed through the pain. He had just been to see his new apartment for the first time, and it had pleased him for the most part. He wondered if maybe his father had died just to pull him back to New York so that he could be offered the post at the Academy. With the contract in front of him, he only had to have his signature witnessed and the cycle would be complete enough for him to have no financial worries for the next two years.

The Museum of Modern Art was close by, and he had a year-round Patron pass for himself and a guest as another perk of his position at the school. He felt cool inside, but it was the empty coolness of self-platitude, rather than the tense, crisp coolness that came with success. As he inhaled cigarette smoke into himself, he thought he could hear the smoke blowing around in his head, but he knew it could not be doing that.

Over the top of his coffee mug, as he lifted it to take the last sip, Drake saw the profile of a man he had not seen since he'd left his teaching job in New York for San Francisco just after the Bicentennial Summer of '76. He immediately stood, walked over to the lone man at the table, slapped his shoulder, and exclaimed, "Rube! Of all the coffee joints in all the towns in all the world..."

"... he walks into mine!" the man declared before turning his head and taking a good look at Drake. "My God! Cyrus! I was *not* expecting to meet *you* today!"

The two men embraced and then backed up far enough from one another to shake hands. "It's been too many years!" Drake said, sitting down at Rube's table.

“I thought you were in California,” Rube said, rubbing a near tear from his cheek. “I certainly didn’t imagine I’d see you *here* in Midtown ever again. How goes with you, you fucking hippy?”

“All good, all good! How’s your painting coming along?” Rube and Drake had been to Vietnam and back together, locked shoulder to shoulder, both by their own choice, and both turned to painting at about the same time after coming back and trying the civilian grind in a newly Free Love world.

“It’s all I do these days,” Rube said. “Well, I hold a few jobs as a cook to keep me in oil and turps, but you get the idea. You’ve sure made a name for yourself since you split town.”

“Slingsing hash! What did we call that abomination you came up with that day at mess in Da Nang? You know.... Back when we were both just Sad Sacks.”

“Da-Nang-fried-Klik. The *only* dish where substitution with SPAM is an *improvement*. I still make that at one of the places I work, and damned if that’s not what they let me call it.”

“I came back for my father’s funeral,” Drake changed the subject now that they’d acclimatized somewhat to one another’s rhythms after all the years they hadn’t talked.

“Sorry to hear that,” Rube whispered.

“No sweat, man!” Drake insisted. “So, you hold all these day jobs, and still keep to painting? Such *drive*.”

“It’s *obsession* more than drive,” Rube replied. “I recently found myself a good agent, and things have been looking up. When are you headed back to California?”

“I’m not going back,” Drake informed him. “I’ve landed a job here as a Senior Artist-in-Residence at Park West Academy.”

“The Promised Land!” Rube exclaimed with a wide tap on Drake’s arm. “Good to have you back, Sarge.”

“I admire your pluck, Corporal,” Drake admitted. “Good to hear you have an agent. That’s what sunk it for me.”

“Pluck fuck schmuck. Not *drive*. Not *pluck*. *Obsession*.”

Drake ordered a *café au lait*, and when it came and it wasn’t hot enough for him, he sent the order back to be heated in the microwave. He’d had enough cold coffee to last him the rest of the week.

“Still got to be *hot* hot, hey?”

“Some things never change,” Drake returned.

“Listen, Sarge, I’ve got an appointment with Richard Poole, my agent, in about ten minutes a click down the street at another café. I was just resting up here a stretch beforehand to calm my jittery nerves and get into the right frame of mind to talk over the details. How about a number and address so I can pay you a visit when I’m not flipping burgers and burning toast?”

Drake copied down the apartment address from his contract onto the back of a now-useless San Francisco business card.

“Say, those are some *way nice* digs,” Rube said immediately upon seeing the address.

“It came as a perk with the position,” he said. He stood again and embraced his friend. “Drop by *any* time. My home is your home. Just radio in a heads-up first so I don’t get caught with my britches in a twist.”

“Will do, Sarge,” Rube said, offering a proper salute, which Drake returned in form with an instinctive *at-ease* nod and smile. Turning smartly, Rube headed out the front door. When his friend was completely out of his line of sight, Drake noticed a pregnant busker playing a flute across the street from the café.

The drink was still not hot enough for his liking, but he did not ask for it to be heated more. It then occurred to him that he should have asked Reuben Hurst to witness his signature on the contract. Instead, he asked his waiter to witness as he was paying the bill, and in addition to tipping, asked him to break a twenty.

On his way out, he crossed the street and gave the busker the four five-dollar bills the waiter had split for him.

“Thanks!” she said. She put one of the bills in her hat. “I was beginning to think today was going to be one of *those* days.”

He squatted to be at her eye level, then held her gaze while talking. “Keep sharing your flute and your smile. ‘Music does bring people together. It allows us to experience the same emotions. People everywhere are the same in heart and spirit. No matter what language we speak, what color we are, the form of our politics, or the expression of our love and our faith, music proves: We are the same.’”

Her smile grew. “Thank you, stranger.”

“We can thank John Denver for that one,” he said. “I know ‘Annie’s Song’ when I hear it. Thank *you*. Good luck.”

11

It was late afternoon when the access buzzer in the hallway of Drake's new apartment sounded. Since he was expecting a visit from Rube and his agent, Richard Poole, he didn't bother to turn on the small monitor that would have allowed him to see who rang. He pushed the entry button and continued with what he had been doing. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee he'd just brewed when a soft knock came from down the hall.

Drake opened the door, expecting to see Rube, but instead, he saw Salomeh Arashpour, dressed, as usual, completely in black. Salomeh walked in without a word, whisked down the hallway, looked about Drake's apartment, and said, "You have a *very* nice place."

Drake didn't know how to respond to her.

"Are you expecting company?" she asked. "I notice you have *hors d'oeuvres*."

Drake wanted to laugh. "I wasn't expecting you, Salomeh."

"You were expecting a woman? A lover perhaps?" she asked, clearly teasing.

"Two men, a painter friend and his agent."

"Oh," she said with a look on her face that seemed to Drake to be approaching relief. "I am an intruder, then?"

"I wasn't expecting you, Salomeh," he repeated. He passed by her and continued what he had been doing before her arrival. "But I would *never* think of you as an *intruder*. I just wasn't expecting your visit."

"I often don't live up to people's expectations of me," she returned, following him into the kitchen. She tapped her foot vigorously on the linoleum in a lithe dancer's movement.

“I usually only ask for a heads-up, is all. To straighten my collar and brush my teeth, mostly,” Drake explained.

“I’m used to dropping by and visiting. Rural Iranians can be like that, even when in Heidelberg. At least *my* family. As for expectations, one must manage one’s expectations.”

Drake keenly remembered the *many* unannounced visits the villagers made to the Drake house in Tarsdejh and nodded at Salomeh his understanding. “Far be it from me to be inhospitable in light of an ancient custom,” he said, waving his arm to offer her a seat on the chartreuse sofa unit in the living room, the first room he’d had refurnished upon moving in. “*Befarma’id*.¹⁶ *Khâneh-ye-man khâneh-ye-shomâ hast*.”¹⁷

“*Moteshakir-am*,”¹⁸ she replied in the short form to his formal offer of hospitality. Salomeh brushed past him as she went down the hall into the living room. She sat on the sofa chair, and when she did, she almost disappeared into it. When the buzzer sounded, she did not even start at the sound. Drake’s suite was situated on a northwest corner of the building, and since the living room was almost entirely windowpane overlooking Central Park, Salomeh stared out the window, completely transfixed by the iconic view, while Drake let in his guest.

Rube had come alone with a bottle of French red wine. “Richard will be a tad late,” he immediately said as the door opened. “But I’m here and I have the juice.”

Drake led Rube from the foyer down the long hallway to the living room. “Salomeh, I’d like you to meet a very dear friend of mine, Rueben Hurst. He’s a fellow painter. Rube, this is Salomeh Arashpour.”

Salomeh stood, hand out. “Pleased to meet you, Herr Hurst.”

“Just *Rube* is good for me, thanks. German? Swiss?” he asked as he gently took Salomeh’s hand. “I can’t place your accent. If you don’t mind my asking.”

“I was born in Heidelberg,” she replied, “but I am Persian.”
“Persian?”

¹⁶ *Befarma’id* (please), often (but not exclusively) when presenting a seat very formally to a guest.

¹⁷ *Khâneh-ye-man khâneh-ye-shomâ hast* (“My home is your home”).

¹⁸ *Moteshakir-am* (“My thanks”).

“Iranian, like half of me,” Drake explained.

“Oh. Great. Listen, is that Iran or Persia? The *place* I mean?”

“Iran is the place, since 1935, Persian is the people and the language,” Drake replied. “You want a coffee? I make mine *hot*.”

“I’ll have whatever Miss Arashpour here is having,” Rube replied. When he caught the view of Central Park, he walked up to the glass and ejected, “Holy shit, Sarge. Can I be the first to officially congratulate you for being *here*?”

“I’ll have a coffee, thank you,” Salomeh said. “*Sarge*?”

“Rube and I served together mostly based out of Da Nang from ’62 to ’66,” Drake explained. “By the time we left, I was his sergeant, and he was my corporal. We did much of what my father had in his day, but he and I did it together.”

“Indeed,” Rube emphasized. “Cyrus there didn’t just inherit his father’s career choice; he also had the knack for an almost photographic visual recall. I’m the same, as luck would have it, so we had each other’s sixes pretty much through the whole thing and could check out one another’s work. ‘Two eyes, *twice*,’ eh, Sarge?”

The phrase “two eyes, *twice*” gave Drake a visible start. He regained his composure and waited for Salomeh to question him.

“I’m not fully understanding, it seems,” Salomeh replied. “My knowledge of this is limited to history books and media. Photographic memories? Whatever *for*? There’s a *non sequitur* in this somewhere for me, I must admit.”

Drake interjected with: “Well, let’s just say we weren’t out painting Dalis of the ‘Hanoi Hilton’ and call it a night with that.”

Rube poked Drake in the ribs and responded with an equally hearty, “But that’s only because they weren’t *calling* it the ‘Hilton’ during *our* tour.” He then became very solemn before continuing, his gaze carefully set on Drake’s face, as he said, in an even tone, “We were mostly based out of Da Nang.”

Salomeh made a whooshing sound with a gesture with her hand of a jet flying over her head to indicate she still was not following. Rube made a gesture with a slight point of the hand showing he had passed the topic to Drake, who explained, “We gathered and analyzed information in the field in the eventuality of escalation, and to assist our hosts in our non-combat capacity. Standard surveillance and reconnaissance and training of locals.”

“So you two were ground-based scouts?” she then offered. “Cartographers?”

“Well not *exactly*, or rather, not *entirely*, Miss Arashpour,” Rube replied. “We did a *bit* more than just *scouting*. We kept an eye on movements, supply chains, and sometimes called in the *thunder*. It was about understanding the bigger picture, which covered a lot of diverse aspects, not just what was in front of our faces. Our visual spatial memories were something you just have to be born with and came in handy—*very* handy—in the field.”

Drake began to close. “When we *did* scout on the ground, although we weren’t there to shoot, or be shot *at*, we didn’t swim like fish in a barrel when we snagged a trip-flare array.”

“Fuckin’ trip-flares....” Rube took a breath and added his own last words on the topic. “And that’s why we *both* became painters: eyes like eagles, memories like elephants, and hearts like *artists*. How about we save the wine for after the video?” suggested. “There’s no time like the *present*. Such nice digs!”

“Video?” Salomeh asked.

“Yeah. Richard said he rented *Interiors*,” Rube replied.

“Never seen it,” Drake replied. “Yeah, Rube, this place is *something*.”

“It’s more than something, my old friend. It’s the fucking Promised Land. Or at least three doors down from thereabouts.”

After Salomeh had finished her coffee, she politely insisted that she had to leave.

“Who is *she* to you?” Rube asked from across the small kitchen table when Salomeh was gone. “Who’d I just bare my tags to? I was trusting your judgment on how much to say. I’m fine with just saying I slung hash.”

“Always cagey, Rube. That’s a good habit to keep. She’s the daughter of the daughter of my mother’s friend,” Drake replied.

“Damned right I’m cagey. Do you remember that time in China Beach when I yapped just a *little* too much and almost got demoted? Anyway, how are you two *getting along*, then?”

“I’m too old for any nonsense,” Drake said, just to make it clear that Rube could drop the playful innuendo from his tone. “She just stopped by out of the blue. Maybe she’s lonely without her family, I don’t know. She’s here from Heidelberg for her dance studies at Elysium, and she has no friends here as yet.”

“Say, dance, hey? Maybe she can introduce me to one of the guys in the corps? Elysium has *gravitas*.” Rube stroked his beard a bit and then said, “No. It won’t do. I’m celibate these days. No time for all that, what with the two jobs and painting.”

Drake refilled both their coffee mugs. “How is your painting going, Rube? Really.”

Rube tapped the table with his free hand and eventually admitted that things were not as active as he would have liked. “I mean, since I’ve gotten an agent, things have been easier on me, but I’m sure as hell not in *your* boots, taking in Central Park in my underwear over coffee. As a fuckin’ *perk* of all things.”

“I actually *did* do that *exact* thing this morning,” Drake laughed. “Best cup of coffee I ever drank, I will admit. I take it you’re painting up a storm, though?” Drake thought about how long it had been since he’d painted anything, and he envied Rube for a few minutes but then decided that the position at Park West Academy had been his salvation and the envy wore off.

“Every night.”

“*Every* night?”

“When I get home from here, I’ll paint until about two in the morning. I’ll wake up at six, go for a six-hour shift, then to a five-hour shift somewhere else, then....”

“I get the idea.”

“One day, my prince will come,” Rube finally sighed.

“I’ve never understood why your turn at the cashbox didn’t come up yet,” Drake admitted. “Your work, your ethic, your esthetic—all of it—are the real deal. I mean that, man.”

Rube brushed his hair off his brow. “Well, Cyrus, I guess I didn’t have what you did to put the commercial aspects of my career where you did in your life until it was so late that I already couldn’t quit my day jobs to support myself just from art sales.”

Drake clasped his hand on his friend’s shoulder in support, knowing full well how close he had come more than once after leaving for San Francisco to pursue his career. “I had to force myself into that action by launching an all or nothing campaign in California,” he confided. “All or nothing.” He choked a bit.

“Felt abandoned,” his friend admitted. “Knew *why* you did it, so I sucked it up and just took it.” A tear was starting to form. “So glad you’re home, Sarge. Even if only for a two-year tour.”

Cyrus Drake felt his face flush and his chest pound. Rube's raw, decent honesty coursed through his understanding of his longtime comrade. "I'm *back*, Corporal. We'll *do* this thing with your special magic and get you up and running in no time."

It was some time before Richard Poole finally arrived with the Allen video. Drake served him a coffee and put the movie into his VCR. As they watched the video, Drake realized that he was not going to like how it ended at all. The mother in the movie first tried to kill herself with gas, and then, over an hour in, she walked into the sea, and Drake couldn't bear to watch it happen. He'd seen enough for two lifetimes.

He went into the kitchen to get more *hors d'oeuvres* for the two others, taking long enough to avoid watching more of that scene than he had to. When he returned with the food, the tray was shaking in his hand.

"Is something wrong?" Richard asked. "We're right near the end of the movie. Just a little more left to go."

"Got a damned case of the shakes," Drake admitted outright.

"Oh fuck me *sideways!*" Rube explained. "It's been so *long* since we've talked about..."

"About what?" Richard asked.

"That scene was disturbing for me," Drake answered.

"Let's just turn the whole video off, if it's going to be a bother," Rube said.

"Let's," Drake said as he turned off the VCR. He rewound the cassette and handed it to Richard in its box. "Nobody had any idea. Allen did a great job, but I can't watch the ending."

"Say, you know, I've got an invitation from a major buyer I sold a few pieces to recently," Richard Poole deftly changed the subject. "His daughter is getting a *royal* send-off to Bryn Mawr. He gave me *carte blanche* to invite anyone I wanted. How about you and Rube come with guests? It's right before the school year starts. The Saturday before Labor Day."

"I can't," Rube returned.

"He won't mind if you bring a beau," Richard replied. "He's on *all* the *right* pages. And I don't mean *rightwing*."

"Not because of *that*," Rube said. "I'm booked at my two jobs for *eons* to come. I'm only here tonight because one of the places I work is shut down for the day to degrease the vents."

“Rube, Rube, Rube,” the agent sighed. “When are you going to learn that rubbing elbows is *the* way to get a regular repeat patron? One day, you’ll have to learn to socialize.”

“I need the money,” Rube returned. “Food and paint.”

“Okay, my friend. Pretty soon we’ll have it so you don’t have to eat your paint. And you, Cyrus? Can you make it?”

“Sure, since it’s on a Saturday,” Drake replied after some thought. He hadn’t had a five-day-a-week job for years, and thinking in terms of weekdays and weekends was unfamiliar to him. Valery’s words about everyone having to stick to a deadline rang with all the glee she had intended when she’d said it.

“Of course. Yes, it’s on the Saturday before Labor Day. I’ll phone you with specific details after I call him and let him know you’re coming.”

“Sounds good,” Drake agreed.

“I’ve seen a few Drakes in his private gallery, actually, so he’ll be *more* than happy to have you over so he can poison your drink and raise the value of his collection.”

“I’ll bring my *own* wine,” Drake laughed.

The time soon came for Rube and Richard to leave. Drake washed some dishes, straightened up the living room, and sat down at the phone beside the sofa. The number was still new to him, but he dialed without having to look in his phonebook.

“Andrew!” he greeted his uncle.

“Hello, Cyrus!” Andrew replied.

“How have you been?”

“It’s been *very* quiet without Ansel coughing all the time in his room, but even so, I miss his company over crosswords. Salomeh has been helping out around here. A godsend. Nothing much doing otherwise. How about yourself?”

“I’ve been settling in here, thanks. Met up with Rube Hurst, my old buddy from back in the day, and had him over for a movie tonight with his agent. Good to hear that Salomeh’s been keeping you company. Speaking of Salomeh, may I speak with her, please?”

Drake heard a hand go over the phone, a muffled cry for Salomeh, and some more noise before Andrew said, “Oh, I remember Rube Hurst alright! Give him my regards. Anyway, here she is. Talk to you later. Don’t be a stranger.”

“Yes? Who is it, please?”

“Drake,” he said.

“Cyrus?”

“Yes.”

“A pleasant surprise to get a call from you. So, what’s up?”

“Listen, don’t take this the wrong way or anything. I’ve been invited to a social gathering on the Saturday before Labor Day, and I need—or at least would prefer—an escort.”

“You want me to attend a social event with you? How could I take *that* in any wrong way?”

“I thought you might like to meet with the art crowd. It might prove to be a good opportunity to make some contacts in the non-dance related sectors of New York’s art community.”

“Are you doing this all for *me*, then?” she asked sharply.

“Well, to be honest, no, I’m not. I have ulterior motives.”

“Ah? I’m intrigued....”

“You’ve somehow gotten me quite interested in you,” he admitted. “It’s been a long time since *anyone* has been able to do that. I’d really enjoy *your* company at the gathering.”

“I’m assuming formal evening attire?”

“I suspect that *would* be best. It’s a society event held at the host’s home, by the sound of it. To be on the cautious side, we can safely assume formal evening cocktail.”

“Very well, it sounds like a *lovely* plan,” she said. “Cyrus?”

“Yes?”

“There *was* a reason I paid you a visit today.”

“Oh?”

“Read that poetry book on the hallway table near the phone.”

“Oh?” he said, reaching for the first edition of *Deaths and Entrances* that Valery had shipped him as a housewarming gift. She had inscribed it simply: “Stay *away* from gin rummy! Val.”

“You’ll know,” she said, just before hanging up.

When the photograph of his mother dropped onto the table, he knew. He hung up the phone. It had a note stuck to it that read: “It was the only one your father had that was just her. *Salomeh*.” With the picture right in front of him, with his mother’s face so clear and close to him, and the scene from *Interiors*, where Eve, the woman played by Geraldine Page, walked into the ocean, his mind *finally* filled in a missing image from his youth.

When Copernicus Roth, self-made patron-of-the-arts, was informed that the painter Cyrus Drake had been invited to his daughter Rebecca's dinner as she headed off to Bryn Mawr's doctoral program in Art History, he had a limousine sent on the day of the party to pick up Drake and his guest.

"First, Salomeh, when you are asked, say you're a dancer or a choreographer, not a 'student,'" Drake strongly suggested as he and Salomeh waited at the curb.

Salomeh, attired in a sleek, black dress she had purchased especially for the party, replied by asking, "Why not just tell them I am a student?"

"I've been to more than a few of these in my time," he answered as he lit up a cigarette for her. "The party is for the host's daughter, who is heading to Bryn Mawr, and that makes *her* the only student—doctoral *or* otherwise—for the evening."

"Ah, I see. Let *her* talk about how it feels to be heading off to school, without taking her stage from her. I appreciate your advice, you know I do, but can I just say one thing?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not *daft*. I have lived my life awash in *ta'arof*¹⁹ and have a *lifetime* of reading the room behind me to draw from. I'll figure out how to behave at this party on my own. Or do you think I need advice on how to *speak*, what to *say*, how to *walk*?"

¹⁹ *ta'arof* (etiquette), a sometimes-indirect ritualized system of politeness, deference, and humility that permeates Persian culture and cements ties at all levels of interaction and all social strata, considered by many to be an absolute necessity in maintaining overall social harmony and cohesion. Practiced and expected amongst Persians both in Iran and amongst the diaspora.

She smiled as if to show that she was not angry but standing her ground. “I’m not much for such ‘advice.’” Her eyes shone with glee as she spoke. “For my part, I’ve no reputation to diminish, and yours is beyond reproach. We’ll be *fine*.”

“I see. I guess I do sort of sound as if I’m treating you like an *ingénue*,” Drake apologized.

Salomeh gave a sincere smile. “I understand why you *think* you might have reason to doubt me on this; I wore *white* to your father’s funeral, after all. But please remember that we’d only *just* found out about his passing, and suddenly there we were in New York setting up my schooling and now in a formal situation we hadn’t anticipated, without a moment to lose as we hastily helped your poor *overwhelmed* uncle behind the scenes with funeral details he didn’t even know *existed*.”

Drake nodded in understanding agreement.

“That day, I was wearing my absolute *best* Jil Sander, out of utmost respect, and then *only* after my having *begged* for an opportunity to visit Saks to find something of the appropriate fall and color. Even the delicate rules of our beloved *ta’arof* have wiggle room in a pinch like this. So I was given a gracious waiver by Andrew himself on the color of my dress.”

“I *did* wonder about that dress, lovely as it was and as you were in it—my bad. Let’s say you figure it out for yourself, and I’ll only step in if you ask. Some of the people at these parties can be real sharks, even to one versed in *ta’arof-jitsu* such as yourself. So just watch your sixes.”

“That sounds fine, then,” she replied, playfully making a chop with her hand in his direction. “And by the way, tonight’s main attire is a Donna Karan accented by a Fendi scarf.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “That Kors clutch finishes the trifecta.”

The limousine, a long, shiny affair, approached and Drake waved so that the driver would see him. Soon, they were inside the vehicle.

“Mr. Drake and guest?” the limousine driver asked without turning around.

“Mr. Drake and Miss Arashpour,” Drake clarified for him.

Salomeh smiled when Drake said this. She put her arm around him the way an intimate might, and he did not discourage her, as she felt good against him.

“How long will the drive be, Mr....?”

“Harold Johns, sir,” the driver answered, finally turning around and smiling. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both. The drive to Great Neck Estates will take us about an hour given current traffic. There are refreshments in the cooler, and you have a wide selection of compact discs to listen to. No smoking, please.”

Drake opened the small disc drawer and was astounded to discover that it was filled with classical Iranian music. “Does Mr. Roth only listen to Jazz and Persian music, Mr. Johns?” he asked.

“I was asked to purchase those on my way to fetch you, Mr. Drake. Mr. Roth assumed that you would enjoy the sentiment. They are yours to keep.”

“Are you the Shah of Manhattan, then?” Salomeh asked in Persian. She reached into the disc drawer and pulled out a green jewel case. “How about this?” she asked. “It’s Mazandarani.”

“Sure, why not?” It was one he did not have in his collection back in San Francisco. Those had been put into his storage space with all his other things after Valery Rockford moved into his old apartment. He missed Persian music, and it had been years since he’d heard music specifically from his home province.

Salomeh put the disc into the player, turned the volume to about half its maximum, and put her head back on the cushioned headrest behind her. Drake put back his head as well, reached over to hold her hand, and closed his eyes, allowing the music to flow through him. He leaned over to the cool glass of the car window, pressing his cheek against it.

The glass felt like his mother’s cheek when he was a child, and the music brought back happy memories. There had been happy times in his childhood. Before her suicide. Times when he pressed his face against hers as she slept, just to feel her coolness against his cheek. The window and the pulsing of the music brought only the happy memories back to his mind, and for that, Drake was content. A few nostalgic tears wet his side of the window as the pouring rain cried on the other side.

When the limousine arrived at the Roth estate, Drake finally opened his eyes. He did not know where they were, since he had not been given an address. He led Salomeh out of the car by the hand and the two made a graceful pair as they appeared.

“You have strong hands,” Salomeh said as she stepped out.

They strolled to a covered area in front of the large mansion. A steward dressed entirely in white came out and asked them to follow him. As they walked through the place, Drake noticed the many paintings on the walls and saw *Rock Nostalgia*, his most recent work, hanging above a statue that he did not recognize, telling him immediately Copernicus Roth must have been the “wealthy New York collector” his agent had said he had placed that canvas with.

The steward guided them into the large dining room, where several people were sitting around a large, polished oak table. Drake assumed that the old man at the head of the table was the host, and so tipped his head respectfully in that man’s direction. Seated to the left side of the old man was a young woman in her mid-to-late twenties dressed in an exceptionally imagined and executed Christian Lacroix gown, and he assumed that *she* must be Rebecca, Mr. Roth’s daughter. Beside Rebecca sat a brutish-looking man, and beside him sat Richard Poole, and his guest.

Drake nodded an acknowledgment to Richard, and Richard nodded back.

“Mr. Cyrus Drake!” the old man exclaimed as they drew closer to that group.

“Oh, could I trouble you to please get up for the guest of honor?” Rebecca said to the man at her side. “Come, come, Mr. Drake and Miss Arashpour.” The young man, sulking, stood and wandered off from the room altogether.

“I didn’t know that *you* were the guest of honor tonight,” Salomeh said in Persian as they approached Rebecca.

“Me neither,” Drake said in English. “I should read my mail more often. It’s been piling up.”

“I was only kidding in the limo about your being the Shah of Manhattan,” she added as a tease.

“Those coronations *always* end badly,” he returned.

“I hope the ride was to your liking,” Mr. Roth said. Only as he approached the old man did Drake see that he was strapped to a wheelchair.

“I appreciate the compact discs very much, Mr. Roth. How very thoughtful of you. Jazz and Persian are *definitely* my taste, and the inclusion of discs from Mazandaran Province show your impeccable attention to detail.”

“The music? Such a *small* gift! A token of my gratitude for the many hours I have spent simply staring at your exquisitely expressionistic work, Mr. Drake. The *very least* I could muster.”

“Decorum *insists* I declare that you flatter me,” Drake said as he pulled out Salomeh’s chair. “But thank you so much for your kind praise.” Grace in the face of praise, she had said.

“Just what do you do, Miss Arashpour?” Copernicus Roth asked. “Are you *also* an artist? Pray tell!”

Salomeh first looked at Drake gleefully before answering and then replied, “Indeed, Mr. Roth, I *am* an artist, as well. I am a dancer and burgeoning choreographer,” with a German accent that was even thicker than her usual. Drake wanted to laugh but held in his amusement. Valery Rockford herself would certainly have admired Salomeh’s impeccable timing and verbal flair.

“A dancer?” Rebecca returned. “From Germany?”

“Yes, I am from Heidelberg,” Salomeh replied.

“Arashpour... is that an Iranian name?” Mr. Roth asked.

“Yes. My parents are also from Mazandaran Province.”

The polite conversation continued for some time as more guests arrived, until everyone who had been invited was present and dinner was served. After dinner, everyone mingled. Salomeh was standing in a corner, sipping her French 75 and chatting with another guest as Drake discussed some of his earlier work with a celebrity dentist who had shown some genuine interest in his career. Mr. Roth rolled up to the two men and asked, “It’s *gauche* to ask, I do realize, but do you know how many Drakes I have?”

“I saw *one* when I came in,” Drake replied.

“*Three*. Three *very* expensive works, considering that you’re still *breathing*,” Mr. Roth said with a laugh before wheeling off to attend to other of his guests. “You’ll go all Rothko on me one day, but *for now* we’re both still in the game. I’m considering your *Study #17*,” he said, “McGuire just sent a photo. *Riveting*.”

“I wouldn’t have minded being your agent,” Richard Poole then said.

“I’m not very productive these days,” Drake admitted.

“Rube is something in *that* department,” Richard returned before sipping his drink. “I’m hoping to sell Copernicus on a few of his pieces tonight, actually. Damned shame he didn’t come. I told him he needs to shake a few hands and not just flip eggs.”

“Rube’s the best there is, bar none,” Drake replied. “I know from experience that keeping him focused on what *you* need from him to help his career is kind of going to be like taming the wind, however.”

“Or herding fucking cats, to be honest,” Richard whispered. “But well worth the effort once you stand back a few yards and take a proper gander at what he’s got on offer.”

“He won’t let you down. Just be sure to plan a very long endgame.” Drake considered how eager Roth was to acquire even one of his recent storage-locker Study #N series from Russ and decided to make a suggestion. “How about I put you in touch with Russ McGuire and the two of you can maybe figure out a co-agenting agreement for Rube’s work? Perhaps you can each take a coast and divide and conquer. You know, be creative. He has it in him to hold down two *jobs*, so why not two *agents*? Reuben Hurst, coming at you cost-to-coast.”

Poole’s eyes lit up. “That would be excellent. We’ll get his foot in that door yet, eh? Or rather, *this* here door,” he added, making a wide demonstrative sweep of his hands.

After he’d finished chatting with Richard and the dentist, Rebecca Roth came over, and Drake took this as an opportunity to start a conversation with her about art history that he knew Salomeh would notice. After about five minutes of smooth talk and standing too much in her personal space for his own comfort, Drake noticed an odd expression come over her face. Then, he felt a tap on his shoulder. The tap felt familiar to him. In his days in Vietnam, he had felt similar rough taps while resting and recuperating over a whiskey neat in some dangerous places. It was the kind of tap someone gave just before punching out his lights—or trying to. This was no exception.

As Drake turned to see who it was who had hailed him, the hulking young man who had earlier been expelled from his seat for Drake’s benefit struck his jaw, and the crack of the impact rang in Drake’s head like the chopping of the flat side of an axe on hardwood. He thought he heard someone in the crowd call out his name, but with the pain searing through his head from the blow, he could not be sure. He instinctively jumped into a solid, close-quarters hand-to-hand stance and prepared to hit as hard as needed to end the fight quickly and cleanly.

“You self-important prick!” the angry young man cursed. “You get *everything* you want, when you want?”

Drake’s elbows were bent and his arms were in front of him. At the edges of his perception, he sensed that a crowd had formed a circle around him and the other. “Listen, I *don’t* want to fight.”

“Fight!” a guest in the crowd almost hollered.

“I *do*,” the man replied.

Drake could not help but be distracted by memories of how life had first been when he had returned from Vietnam. That had not been a popular war, even in the early years when he and Rube had been involved. Nobody challenged a Second World War vet to a fight. He’d gotten and given more than a few bloody noses and blackened eyes over being called a baby killer before deciding to cut loose and move to San Francisco. Since having moved into his new place, which had a full gym and pool, he’d had a month’s hard pumping iron on the rack behind him, and although he was not yet back into his USMC form, his core strength had never left him due to his long daily walks and the resistance unit he’d left in San Francisco, and after putting some ambition into it, his explosive strength was returning.

“It’s only fair to warn you,” Drake said very calmly, but loudly enough that the crowd could hear as well, “that I’m trained to end this pretty quickly.” The other swung his fist again, but this time Drake moved out of instinct and the blow came nowhere near him. “Not so easy face-to-face?” he noted. “Let’s *stop* this and *shake hands*. For Rebecca and our host, Mr. Roth.”

Drake gestured with his right hand, reaching out with an offer of goodwill understood across the globe, but to no result.

Two swings later, the attacker realized that Drake was not going to let land another, and the instant this understanding came over his face, he charged Drake and held him in a clinch.

Drake had expected something that basic. He clasped his hands together around the hulk who was holding him up against the wall and started squeezing the air out of his lungs, adjusting his right hand's grip on his left wrist and then forearm as his reach constricted like a mad boa each time the man exhaled. The attacker let go of his own grip, and Drake was soon free again, standing like a boxer again, ready to fight properly again. By now, the other man was swinging wildly in the air at no target in particular, and one, two from the right, then upper from the left, all restrained blows to the least damaging targets on the man's head, and the young man was squirming on the floor, his face a bleeding mess in the palms of his hands, but likely with nothing broken and no burst vessels in his eyes to contend with. It was then that Drake realized that he'd cut his left hand on the man's teeth. He didn't care, though; he felt good. He knew that was *just* adrenaline cheering. Liquid fool's gold in the veins, clouding all reason if left to take hold. He steadied himself against the rush.

A few minutes later, both men were being tended to by the dentist in the kitchen. Henry Glaum had knocked one of Drake's teeth loose, and Drake's hand was cut, but other than a butterfly bandage on the hand, no one had been seriously hurt. Salomeh sat beside Drake as the dentist examined his tooth.

"It *may* have to come out," Glen Brown said. "Can't say for sure. It's the premolar, so it's in a place that's easy to work in a bridge if that happens. The teeth on either side seem pristine, so Maryland would make sense if it comes to that, to avoid crowns."

"Listen, Mr. Drake....," Henry began. "I'm—you know—feeling the *consummate* jackass. I was royally pissed about your being given my place at the table, chatting Rebecca up, and I drank too much, that's all. Lost my head. I am a fucking idiot."

"Don't worry about it," Drake replied. "I was your age once. I won't press charges or anything if you won't. We both took our licks, fair and square—at least fair and square after your *first* whack upside my head. I tried not to mess you up *too* badly. No loose teeth for *you*. As I said: I was trained to end things quickly. You were never in any danger of getting hit *too* hard."

“And my face thanks you for that,” Henry said with a laugh through a fat lip. “What’s left of it.”

Copernicus Roth rolled himself into the kitchen, laughing to himself with every push on the wheels of his chair. “Oh, it has been a *while* since two of my guests took to fists,” he said with a smile. “There’s blood all over my salon.”

“The *whole* thing was my fault,” Henry strained to say, his head leaned back with an ice pack on his cheek and lip.

“Don’t worry about it,” Mr. Roth insisted. “That was one of the best shows I’ve seen in a *long* time. Mind you, Rebecca was *not* amused, Henry. Why don’t you go and explain to *her*?”

Henry Glaum walked out of the kitchen with his shoulders drooping. When he had gone, Mr. Roth asked if Drake wanted to stay the night in the guest room.

“Stay the night?”

“I owe it to you, Mr. Drake,” the host insisted. “You are my guest of honor, and I would *not* feel right about sending you home with a cut-up hand and a loose tooth. My doctor will be here in the morning. He can take proper care of your and Henry’s injuries, entirely at *my* expense: right up to a dental implant, should it come to that. What do you say? Let me make it right.”

Drake looked at Salomeh. “What do you think?” he asked her in Persian. He looked in a small mirror that hung on the kitchen wall, saw how terrible the bruise on his jaw looked, and realized an hour on the road would not suit him much at all.

“Yes, sure. It’s up to what *you* want,” she replied in Persian.

Drake wanted to laugh out loud but could not muster it through the pain in his jaw. “Thank you, Mr. Roth,” he said after about a half-a-minute of consideration on the matter. “Offer accepted. And that *includes* the possible implant!”

“Great! Will you two be staying in the same room?”

Drake looked Salomeh in pupils of her deep, brown eyes, and when he recognized her consenting nod to the affirmative, replied, “We’ll be staying in the same room, if it’s no trouble for you, Mr. Roth.” He then took Salomeh softly by the arm.

“No trouble at all. You are a bit of a mess, Mr. Drake, but didn’t you sure tear up Henry? I bet he wasn’t expecting *that* at all when he came at you! He’s a brick shithouse, that one!”

“No such thing as a *former* Marine,” Drake replied.

“Never was a Marine, but I used to be a scrapper myself,” the old man said. “I once had a fistfight with Hemingway, you know. While I was in Spain, in my youth. 1938, when I was all of twenty-years-old. Ah, to be that age again, what I’d give....”

“Who won?” Salomeh asked.

“As in this case,” Mr. Roth said, “age and experience beat the holy shit out of youth and hot-headedness. Hemingway won, of course. Beat the britches off me.”

“I *was* willing to assume it was you,” Drake jested.

Roth pulled out a small bottle that was attached to the gold chain on his neck and said, “There’s *my* claim to fame. The tooth Ernest Hemingway beat out of my head. We didn’t have implants back then, so it was a crude fixed bridge for me. Tonight brought it all back to me.” He rolled himself out of the kitchen, with his small entourage following closely behind.

“Why do you think Henry hit you?” Salomeh whispered in Drake’s ear as they followed Copernicus Roth out.

“Too much drink and not enough think,” he replied very softly. “Rebecca shouldn’t have asked him to give up his seat for me. I shouldn’t have flirted just to piss you off.”

“Flirting to piss me off? That’s so very sweet, my iron-fisted Ezraïl. *Sweet*, but you are a few decades out of touch on a few things.” She patted him gently and smiled playfully.

Drake replied, “That punch might have driven a piece of bone deep into my brain. Which is kind of my saying that for the rest of tonight, I plead the Fifth, your Honor.” His pulse was racing, and he was feeling alive for the first time in a long time. He was well aware that this, too, was very likely adrenaline, and he breathed in, held for five, breathed out, held for five, and found his center as well as he could, to avoid being on instinctive and reactive alert with the other guests for the rest of the evening.

Drake and Henry shook hands in front of everyone, and the socializing resumed. An hour or so later, after most of the Roths’ guests had departed, the steward showed Drake and Salomeh to a guest bedroom on the second floor of the mansion. It was a large room, with a large bed. Above the head of the bed hung a masterfully hand-painted reproduction of Eugène Delacroix’s *The Abduction of Rebecca*.

“That’s funny,” Drake said.

“What’s that,” Salomeh replied as she looked about the room as if trying to find anything at all that appeared amusing. “I’m seeing excessive opulence but nothing *amusing* as such.”

“That Delacroix up there,” he said. “It tells an interesting story about our host.”

“Is it the real thing?” she asked coyly. “I don’t know painting at the depth that would be required to analyze such a work at any serious, or even amusing level, except to know what I like. To me, it looks something quite other than what I would call *funny* but, as I say, I might be missing some subtle comedic cue.”

“It’s a *very* good hand-painted reproduction,” he said. “It’s *almost* indistinguishable from the original, were it not for the artist having signed his own signature to it, which was entirely the ethical thing to have done. Reproductions of *this* level are a life’s work in itself. So far, it’s the *only* reproduction I’ve seen in this place. Copernicus Roth must be very, very wealthy.”

“Still, what’s so *funny* about it?” she asked as she sat on the bed and looked more closely at the painting. “Reproductions don’t strike me as being *humorous*. What’s the punchline?”

“Two things. Firstly, it’s called *The Abduction of Rebecca*, which I suppose makes it some sort of Roth family joke.”

“Quite a family sense of humor, that!” Salomeh agreed on his first point, bringing her gaze to the signature on the piece.

“Second, and likely a mere coincidental aside, Rebecca was attired tonight in a stunning bit of couture styled by—”

“—Christian *Lacroix*. As in *Delacroix*,” Salomeh interjected on the riddle Cyrus was elaborating upon. “Her *own* humor?”

“Likely unintentional, were it not for her choice of doctoral studies. Coincidence, *surely*.”

“Her father wears a tooth around his neck and laughed at a bloody fistfight amongst his and his daughter’s guests,” Salomeh responded. “I don’t suspect that their eccentricities and esthetic choices are *accidental*. I would suggest they’re *grandiose*.”

“A fitting read on this lovely family, indeed.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Drake said as he unbuttoned his blood-stained Versace Pima French cuff. The blood had made a mess, but it was a superficial mess; his undershirt had not been soiled.

“Do you remember that kiss?”

“Yes, how could I forget *that* kiss?” He placed his father’s emerald-accented golden monogrammed links on the side table.

“Since then, you have been quite remote with me, despite a few overtures from myself. I was shocked that you agreed to share a room. I was not sure you found me desirable.”

“Not for lack of *anything* in *you!*” Drake said, finally pulling his shirt off, carefully to avoid staining anything of their hosts’.

“Then why haven’t you reciprocated until now?” she asked. “I mean, yes, when I kissed you first that night in Andrew’s attic, you did *eagerly* kiss me back... but then... *nothing*. And now here we are, together in a room, with you half-undressed.”

“As I told you when I invited you here a month back: you intrigue me greatly; however, I’ve learned that there’s far more to human attraction and desire than merely dancing once around the mulberry bush. Some things one must not undertake hastily.”

“You speak funny,” she said. “But I agree with what you’re saying, in principle. We must consider some matters before we act, as we cannot unring the bell. You are a very cautious person, sometimes *too* cautious, perhaps, but I agree that one mustn’t act in haste when others’ feelings and emotions become involved.”

“As you put it, I’m perhaps a few decades out of touch.” He realized that he was feeling shy inside. He searched for exactly what he wanted to say, without grandiosity or even humility, and finally said, “I desire you *completely*; mind and body.”

“Then come sit *beside* me,” she said, patting the bed to her right side. “*Befarma’id.*”

He sat beside her and put his arm around her and said as gently as he could. “I want us to figure one another out.”

She trembled at his touch, but Drake could sense that it was not from fear, but from being aroused. With his good right hand, he brushed her hair from her face and kissed her lips. He found as he did so that it had been he who was trembling, not her. Or had it been both of them? He undid the tiny latches on the back of her dress, exposing her smooth, golden skin. He stood up and stared at her in rapt euphoria.

She reached back to unlatch her bra, and stayed perfectly in place, her only movement from her breathing, without breaking a single line. “Are you still equally interested in both my mind *and* body, now that you’ve seen at least my body?” she asked.

Drake did not speak. He could not. He instead began to reach for his belt buckle, but Salomeh stopped him and undid his belt for him. Then, she undid his button, and slowly slid his zipper down. He could feel his heart pounding so loudly that he was sure that she must have heard it, too.

She found a condom in her purse very quickly with one hand. Slowly, she leaned to his abdomen, which was shaking. Soon she placed the condom on him. He was not sure if this most intimate kiss was real. His hands and legs were trembling. He kissed her again.



Drake leaned over the edge and threw the spent safe into the wastebasket under the table beside the bed. Salomeh pulled his head into the hearth of her bosom and started stroking his hair as if comforting him from some pain. At first, he didn't understand why she was doing this, but slowly, as the rush of the adrenalin and hormones of passion at last wore off, he again started to feel the excruciating pain from the earlier hit to the jaw.

“Oh, by the way, Cyrus,” she said very softly, “if you look *really* closely at the signature on that piece, you'll see that it reads: *Rebecca Roth*. That's *some* punchline, indeed.”

He made a light chuckling sound. The smooth, gentle strokes of her hand on his cheek brought him slowly to sleep with his head still resting on her. That night, he dreamt he was a sea bird, soaring above the shores of a sea not unlike the Caspian of the happier moments of his childhood. The gentle caress of Salomeh upon his head became a breeze around his body. Only for a moment did he notice a woman sleeping upon the shore, but he was soaring in ecstasy now, and paid no notice.

A month passed and Drake's Maryland bridge, fully paid for by Copernicus Roth, still felt a bit foreign in his mouth. Unlike his benefactor, Drake did not opt to hang the spent upper right premolar around his neck; he'd worn dog tags for four long years back in his twenties, and that was enough for him to have had his day with such overt martial displays.

He and Salomeh continued to see one another as much as they could manage, growing closer in their intimacy and mutual understanding. Drake had made hard time at the gym and doing laps in the pool a morning routine, in addition to his twice daily speed-walk through Central Park to get to Park West Academy of Modern Visual Art. By month's end, he had also built a rapport between himself and his students, and he was enjoying his new stability as a teacher.

"Things were not like *this* when I was an English teacher," he confessed to another painting teacher as he prepared his lecture notes for the day at the table of the staff room.

"How so?"

"I'm actually *enjoying* myself these days," he said.

"Whom the gods would destroy," his colleague jested, "they first offer nice contracts. Which is a *good* thing."

Later, well into his lecture about modernist painting and expressionism's place therein, Drake stopped himself in the middle of a long sentence. One of his students, a girl dressed outlandishly, had entered the classroom a few moments earlier. Something about her highly accentuated presentation jumped his mind to a topic completely off the track of what he had been discussing up to that point in the session.

“I have something for you all to think about,” he said. “You can all paint, you all have the basic skills of color selection, and composition, and you all have a fairly comprehensive knowledge of art history.”

Some of the students nodded, and others tapped their pencils on their notes. One ejected impatiently from the back, “*And?*”

“My question is this: what makes you *artists*, as opposed to art curators or critics?”

“We are artists because we *must* get involved in creating art, not just in the bureaucratic act of describing and cataloging someone else’s work,” someone offered.

Drake thought about this answer, wondering if he could even remember when he had last painted anything. “So you are artists because you *create*? How many of you are familiar with literary postmodernism?” He opened his desk drawer, sorted through it, and pulled out a very thin book. Something Salomeh had been explaining to him about her coursework at Elysium seemed like a good idea to try with his own students.

“Anything goes?” someone jested.

“Sure, there’s some iconoclasm involved. But here we are talking about how art isn’t just about creation or deconstruction,” Drake finally said. “It’s about *participation*. This is where we start to venture into poststructuralist reader-response theory and even go straight into Roland Barthes’ ‘Death of the Author.’ The artist presents an interpretation of some event, and the viewer, reader, or listener participates in this and creates a perception of the art. The final synthesis is the work of art.”

He placed the novella down. “For instance, this recent novella, Cohen Benjamin’s *Passing Through*, presents a *single* day in the life of a rural village, from *multiple* perspectives. The author presents *his* creation, but this is not the simple entirety, since the reader *interprets* and *experiences* the work. Now, considering this, what is an artist?”

“The artist *and* the participants in the art,” someone followed through.

“Exactly!” Drake exclaimed. “We are mere *co-creators* of our works. Lacking omniscience, we cannot ascribe motives onto artists; if they don’t disclose them, we are left in the land of speculation. So we must interpret. We cannot control this fate.”

“Couldn’t we do our best to control it by setting the proper mood and guiding the viewer or reader in a certain direction we wish them to go? Breadcrumbs or Ariadne’s Thread, if you will.”

“E. D. Hirsch would suggest we have far more of this control than we actually do, based only upon how many times I’ve read reviews of my pieces that missed the mark of my intent *entirely*. But that didn’t make them *bad reviews*. That didn’t make my guideposts insufficiently skillfully placed. Not always, anyway. We can always do our best to *steer*, but let’s remember, even though we try to steer the craft, the river runs beyond our strength as artists, and we’re floating down it for the next waterfall. The moment we step away from the rudder—it’s not *our* craft to steer anymore. It’s the reader or viewer from that point forward.”

The faces in the class showed that he had their attention, and so Drake continued. “So, I ask this: why do we spend so much attention on the *appearance* of our paintings, or for that matter, on our own *personas*, if these will be interpreted differently by each act of participation in our creation? Any ideas? What drives our immense efforts to be seen across such subjective vistas?”

“I dress how I feel inside,” the student who had entered the class late stated. “I dress how I feel.”

“Feeling is certainly *part* of it, but did Picasso *feel* like the entirety of *Guernica*?” Drake returned with a question. “Is that whole tableau a feeling or feelings?”

“Perhaps he did or did not, but at the end of the day,” she replied, “how I am dressed now is how I feel, and that is the authentic me I wish to present.”

“That’s pretty much my own story, as well,” someone agreed. “I dress how I feel, and how I wish to present today.”

“I hesitate on feelings as core in presentation, as feeling is perhaps more *local*, and thus less *universal*, than we’d wish. Art is not entirely about conveying how we *feel*, and then having someone participate in our feelings in a shared catharsis,” Drake said. “It can also be about our roles and our perceived roles in larger *systems*, absent feelings. I am going to read a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke. Apply it to your art. Apply it to your *being-for-yourself* and your *being-for-others*. Write a one-thousand-word essay about how this applies to *your* work. Have it on my desk by tomorrow morning. It will be graded. I will be kind.”

At this point, those in the class who had not already taken out their notebooks suddenly did so.

“Okay, here it is. Think hard about it and how it applies to your art, and what I’ve said about creation and participation:²⁰

We indeed discover that we do not know our role; we look for a mirror; we would like to remove our make-up and take off what is false and be real, but somewhere there is still a forgotten piece of our disguise clinging to us. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows, we do not notice that the corners of our mouths are twisted. And so we go around, a mockery, merely half-existing: neither beings nor actors.

“Have fun!” he said, sitting down. “There are absolutely no wrong essay answers ever in my class, as you already know.” He clapped the book from which he had read the quotation shut and finished the coffee he’d been drinking. His coffee done, he turned to the novella. When class was over, he rushed to catch a ride with another teacher on a day he wasn’t walking.

“Thanks for dropping me off again,” he said. “I should look into getting a car.”

“No problem,” George Howe, a sculpting instructor, replied. “Glad to be of help. It’s on my way anyway. Say, you usually walk, so you probably don’t want anything fancy here what with the traffic. I have a beat-up old blue sedan if you ever decide you want to upgrade from shoe leather and hopping rides.”

“Thanks! I’ll very likely take you up on that, George!”

Drake rushed to the performance hall, found a seat near the back, and watched the dancers. Salomeh danced with them, and as he watched their jazz ballet, Drake centered on the freedom of her movement, her perfectly tamed but absolute power, and her focused energy. He took a small sketchbook out of his carry bag and began to sketch her. In the three weeks he had been watching her at Elysium after he finished teaching, he had sketched her and others with her on five occasions, which was more than he had done for longer than he could remember.

²⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, translation from original German due to Jackson.

After rehearsal, the two went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They made their way around, enjoying one another's company as much as the displays themselves. When they came to the portrait of Gertrude Stein done by Picasso in 1906, Drake could not help but emit a dry laugh.

"What's so funny?" Salomeh asked.

"Oh, nothing, really," he said. "I've always considered this one of Picasso's absolute worst, that's all. She looks like she's presiding over an execution."

"Yes, a bit. Perhaps she was, in her way."

He dug into his carry bag and produced the novella he had shown his class earlier that day. "Here, this is for you," he said.

"*Passing Through?*" she said, taking the book. "I have never heard of it, or the author. It hasn't made it to a German edition."

"The author is a good friend of mine from San Francisco," he explained. "Open it."

She opened it and read the inscription.

"You want me to *move in* with you?"

"Yes. Do you know how hard it is to get an author to write an inscription like: 'Move in with him, please'?"

"Thank you for the gift, and *yes*. A sweet—and *strange*—way to ask me, but certainly *yes*."

Drake put his arm around Salomeh. "We see so much of one another, it makes sense that you should move in," he said. They started for the front of the museum.

"So, besides the fact that you had your novelist friend write this inscription, what is this book about?" Salomeh asked.

"About the consequences of choices we make, I suppose," he replied. "You have to read it and decide for yourself. Just like I had to decide that Gertrude Stein never, ever should have been painted by Picasso."

"What choices have *you* made of consequence?" she asked when they were on the front stairs.

"That's a big question," he replied.

"Well, you asked me to move in with you, so I suppose I have an answer," she finally said. "That's a pretty big decision."

Drake hailed a cab, and they were soon at his apartment.

"Can you tell me about your mother?" Salomeh asked when they were inside.

“I’d rather not just yet,” Drake replied, taking off his coat.

“I’d like to know,” Salomeh pressed.

“I know only that she killed herself when I was a boy,” he finally said. It seemed only fair, now that she would be living with him, to open up, even if just a small bit.

“I heard all about that from my mother,” Salomeh admitted. “No one ever said how or why, however. Specifics were always shrouded in impenetrable *khamushi*.”²¹

“All of that silence was because she walked into the sea one night, and her body was found the next day,” Drake replied. “Your grandmother, Badria, took me in as an orphan until my father returned from the Korean War.”

“An *orphan*? First I’ve heard about this from *anyone*.”

“She petitioned to adopt me, actually,” Drake admitted. “As if I had no living father. So yes, she took me in as an orphan. My father refused to return from Korea. Or rather, he was denied a compassionate discharge. They are the same thing to a kid.”

“What would that have made me?” she gasped with a grin.

“Decency keeps me from thinking of what that would have made you,” Drake laughed. “Those were three really good years for me, considering it all. I sometimes wonder what it would have been like to have been adopted into the Arashpour family and to have stayed there in Tarsdejh. When a man leaves his homeland, he stands the risk of becoming a reproduction of the original. He loses roots. He may even become a forgery of himself.” He took her coat and hung it in the closet.

“So, now we live *together*,” she said, throwing her arms around him. “I am happy that we’ll be under one roof. And such a lovely roof it is! My family will also be *very* happy that we’re more official. *Ruzam ro sakhti, Kurosh*.”²²

Drake held her closely. As they were hugging, the phone rang, but he did not get it. A few minutes later, he checked the message, which reported that Russ McGuire had sold some more of his older work and had pulled in quite a suitcase full of money. He walked outside, looking out over the living city. Salomeh felt good up against him.

²¹ *khamushi* (silence).

²² *Ruzam ro sakhti, Kurosh* (lit. “You made my day, Cyrus.”).

“It is a wonderful view,” Salomeh said. “World class.”

“A sea of lights and trees, curves and lines,” Drake replied.

“What was the phone message about?” she asked.

“Some of my older work has been selling,” he answered.

“I’ll be coming into some extra money soon enough. I’m finally flush once more, and I’m grateful for it. I’ll be wiser with it this time around, let’s hope, *ensh-Allah*.”

“It’s good to have sales, but what about *new* work? I haven’t seen you painting at all,” she noted with concern. “*Khubi?*”²³

Drake did not know how to reply to her observation. “I *have* been drawing again, which is a good start,” he finally replied. He lit a cigarette, and the smoke blew to his left in a stream across the flicker of the city lights.

“Why haven’t you been painting in oils on canvas, though?” she asked, lighting her own cigarette. “That’s your thing.”

“I am not *exactly* certain,” he admitted. He leaned upon the terrace rail and looked toward the street below. Salomeh reached around him with her left arm and put her hand in his pocket.

After an extended silence, Salomeh asked, “Do you think it has anything at all to do with your father’s death? Did all those memories jam the gears? Emotional health matters to creativity.”

“I have not painted for some time,” Drake replied with an admission. “Long *before* my father died, it all stopped. A year or so before, give or take a stretch. Teaching was quite welcome.”

“Do you *want* to paint again? At your *full* tier, I mean.”

Drake admired Salomeh’s determination to not become a silent partner in the relationship but only wished his taciturn reflexes did not make that such a chore for her. “Sure,” he finally admitted. “*Absolutely*. When the time comes to do so. When my heart, soul, and mind are right about whatever angst it is that has stopped my brush. Sketching you has been getting my *instinct* back. And the necessary excitation of my inner eyes. But clearly, there are a few things inside that still need to fall into perspective, if we assume that my perspective has been set askew *somewhere* along the line.”

“You must do *whatever* it takes,” Salomeh said. She kissed his cheek. “It’s who you *are*. I can see that in your new sketches.”

²³ “*Khubi?*” (lit. “Good [are you]?”) “Are you alright?”

“What do you say you and I go to Iran for *Nowruz*?” Drake asked Salomeh. “I believe I’ll find the emotional dam *there*.”

“Iran? I have never been there. I am sure I *could* miss school if you really would like to go there, but what about your position? Can you handle that many days out of your schedule?”

“Contract says I can get a leave-of-absence for ‘development within the discipline.’ I’m sure I could swing it to look like a sketching trip for my next work. With prep, I could block it in.”

“Yes, that sounds interesting! There is always the *little* issue of the law, though. We *are* living in sin.” She nibbled his ear. “It is good for *us*, but what about the *laws*? You were born there and though I’ve never been, I *was* a citizen until I naturalized with my family in Germany in 1981. We will *not* be given the same lenience they might extend to plain Westerners in these matters. Especially somewhere *very* traditional like Tarsdejh. This makes it all more of a dark gymkhana than a *Nowruz* visit together.”

Drake thought about it. “We are *now* unmarried and living together, but I can get some paperwork done up that makes it look like we’re married so that we can enter Iran together.”

Salomeh started to laugh. “That is *not* what I was expecting to hear today, but... go on. Please paint this tale of yours for me.”

“Well, here’s my thinking,” he then began. “One of my best students earns some textbook money as a forger. Government bureaucrats are nothing if not impressed by pretty paperwork. That and a few facilitation payments should get us there.”

“Seriously? Fake *marriage* papers?” she protested. “What about my family? What will *they* say? I highly suspect they will think this is *bisharaf*,²⁴ and we *cannot* do that to them.”

“They know we’re serious about one another, and now that we’re under one roof, all the more so,” Drake said. “Our family ties run deep, and they’ve overlooked our age difference because of this. They’ll understand *why* we have to forge papers to make it simpler to get in. It’s just civil paperwork, nothing major.”

²⁴ *bisharaf* (lit. “without honor”) For one to be labeled *bisharafi* (dishonorable, disgraceful) is a strong cultural wound that can bleed onto one’s direct family, and some would (for example) change sides of the street to avoid being seen with those known to have fallen into something that merits this level of shaming, as it can be treated as if contagious.

“It’s a *lot* to ask of me, Cyrus. You’re moving like the winds. We only *just* agreed on moving in together,” she explained. She searched his face intently, as if looking for a hint about what she was being asked and why. “But *whatever* may be ahead, under *one roof is* under *one* life, and I *am* committed, for however long we will be, and if this is *important* to you, Cyrus,” she said. “So this *once* I won’t say that asking me to have my name on those bullshit papers is too much to ask. Let’s *not* make a habit of it, though. So, again, I specify: if it’s *important* to you....”

“Somehow, I *truly* feel it is,” Drake replied, taking a long drag from his smoke before crushing it into the ashtray.

“You can *bloody* well know that my family needs to hear of this Potemkin’s Village of a plan from *you*. I’ll watch from afar with popcorn and a cold beer as you sweat through the family inquisition they put you through as you dance around this one for them. I leave the choreography of *that* performance up to you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he agreed.

“Let’s also *not* make a habit of living fast and riding hard, unless it involves *only* the two of us.” She kissed him quickly.

“Absolutely. I’m being pulled over there to deal with matters deep and dark,” he explained. “I can’t do that without you, or I’d ride the rails on this one alone. And you will be able to touch your earth and smell the ancestral sea and feel the froth and foam I ran through as a young child with your mother.”

“*Che ajab!*”²⁵ she sealed their deal with the Devil. “That earth better not smell of sulfur.”

“It will smell only of the sea,” Cyrus said before reciting in Persian the first stanza of a poem, written by the fisherman-poet:

Let me begin, O sea of my ancestors,
by washing my nostrils with your foam
and thrusting my rope-torn hands
deeply into your cool, salty water
and bending my back to your crashing
while the seabirds cry out like muezzins
before the morning finally arrives.

²⁵ *Che ajab!* (lit. “How strange!”), figurately meaning “What a piece of work!” in this context.

“What is that?” she asked. “I don’t recognize this poem.”

“The first verse of Hajj’s ‘The Ancestral Sea,’” he answered.

“First verse? So, there’s *more*? Recite some more for me, please. I feel wonderful and excited, and I could use a *poem* in my head to chill my flames. It’s been a *whirlwind* of a day.” She leaned into him.

“I only memorized the first verse for now, but I will study the entire poem and recite the whole thing for you—or perhaps Hajj will do that for you instead, who knows?—when we are in Tarsdej for *Nowruz*,” he replied just before kissing her forehead tenderly. “That’s a *promise*.”

“Then, for now, just recite that first verse again. And maybe some Khayyam if you know any in Persian,” she asked. “I want to bask with you out here for a long, quiet while, in the sea of lights and trees and curves and lines.” She kissed his cheek after asking for this small lover’s kindness, and he recited Hajj’s verse for her once more, as she had asked, and then a few of Omar Khayyam’s most known quatrains, with occasional pulsing birdcalls from Central Park serving as Nature’s Ney.²⁶

²⁶ *ney* (reed flute), A traditional wind instrument, often played to accompany spiritual and mystical poetry.

“*Ja, bitte?*”²⁷

“*Salâm, Badria-jun-am,*”²⁸ Drake greeted Badria Arashpour, the grandmatriarch of the Arashpour family. It was three in the afternoon for her, which had him sitting over a steaming cup of medium roast at nine in the morning his time.

“I am so pleased to hear your voice! I wasn’t expecting your call, though. *Hamechiz khub-e?*”²⁹

“*Hâl-e-mâ kheili khub hast, kheili mammun,*”³⁰ he replied to immediately allay any concerns she might have about Salomeh’s or his well-being. “I am calling, *mâmâ*, to have a conversation about our shared past in Tarsdejh. I have no bad news.”

“It’s good to hear you say *mâmâ!*” Badria overflowed.

“Well, you almost *adopted* me!” he replied, lighting up a cigarette. He inhaled, took a moment, and continued. “There are things that I have *never* told you, or *anyone* else, except Salomeh, now that she and I share our life together.”

“What things?” Badria pressed gently. “You’ve never talked much about your mother since all the way back then, so I’ve always wondered if you perhaps knew something that we all did not. But even if so, what brings this call on *now?*”

²⁷ “*Ja, bitte?*” (lit. “Yes, please?”), German telephone greeting on picking up.

²⁸ *jun-am* from *jân-am* (lit. “my dear/soul”) An affectionate pronunciation of a suffix phrase of endearment and respect.

²⁹ “*Hamechiz khub-e?*” (lit. “Everything is good?”) In this context conveys the concerned probing sense of: “Is everything *alright?*”

³⁰ “*Hâl-e-mâ kheili khub hast, kheili mammun*” (lit. “Our health is very good, thank you very much”).

Cyrus realized as he began to form an answer in his head that his silence when asked by his uncle or others about details of his mother's death had welled up in him *not* from some nonsensical *stoicism* but rather from a lack of ears and hearts on the other side of the conversation to truly resonate with the *pain* he needed to express. The listener might have some universal empathy for his anguish and for the dreadful tragedy others had befallen, but their empathy would be humming a tune of grace, and what he needed to know was that they shook from the very thundering atoms of Beethoven's "*Appassionata*." Badria Arashpour had those ears, that heart. He had known her as a mother figure for three years between the age of ten and thirteen. Of his list of people to call and explain himself, he knew *she* must be the first, for he had the most to say to her, as she alone had the emotional capacity to *hear* his words as they were meant and *felt*. After a very long moment to center himself, he began in earnest.

"Why do *you* believe my mother killed herself?" he asked so that he would know where to go from that stark point in their conversation.

"I *personally* believe from despair. I saw how she handled Ansel's going to fight in Europe right after your birth," she began to explain. "I believe the despair finally overtook her when he refused to change his mind about Korea. The simplest truth."

"I suspect everyone in Tarsdejh believed this," he agreed.

"I never heard a *word* otherwise. Even her parents and siblings *strongly* supported this interpretation," she added.

"I want to go to Mazandaran, to Tarsdejh, to resolve some *sensitive* matters surrounding her drowning," he put forth.

Badria made audible sounds the way someone on the other end of a phone conversation might to be sure one knows they are thinking about what has been said, and then finally replied, "That's a bit *complicated*, but I think you *could* figure that out."

"I want Salomeh to come *with* me," Drake stated, finally putting forth the most important point. "This coming *Nowruz*."

She let out a mirthful laugh. "Oh, sweet child, you can do many things—I have seen how you've become *such* a *successful* human being, and I am *so* proud—but unless you have found yourself a Djinni in a bottle, *this* is not one of those miracles that is yours to unleash. Or can I start calling you Aladdin?"

Drake could not help but laugh with her. “You’re talking about our unmarried *hamkhâneh*³¹ status?”

Badria continued to laugh. “*Areh, digeh!*”³²

“We want to go there for *Nowruz*,” he went on.

“Listen, Cyrus, you know *me*. I have *no* worries *whatever* about the two of you. Like I said, I followed your life as your own mother would have, had that dire fate not come to her. But Salomeh knows full well that an unmarried man and woman these days—no matter *what*—are just not going to be traveling together under *any* kind of freedom to enjoy *Nowruz* together.”

“Indeed,” he replied. “But, *mâmâ*, we are not going there just to have *fun*. Which means I’ve *thought* about this obstacle.”

She went silent and then asked, “Are you calling to ask for my blessings to *marry*? I see *that* as the *only* way to enter Iran.”

Drake did not answer immediately, out of respect for how jumping back with a *no* to her question so quickly would be perceived. Finally, he replied, “Marriage is *just* a *legal* contract in *both* her and my understanding of marriage. We share *one* roof and that means we share *one* life *now*. We are still fresh in our relationship, and just as you and your relationship with Mehrdad-*âqâ* grew from where you were when you started as an arranged marriage, between those who had common affection to the deep love you now have, she and I have our careers, estates, her status due to the whole family’s German naturalization in ’81, and other considerations that preclude what you have suggested. She and I have already discussed that the family will ask about marriage, and your question is not unwarranted or unexpected, but it’s not *yet* in our *Jâm-e-Jam*.”³³

“I respect that, as do all of us who care for you both,” Badria agreed. “But I’m not coming to a clear understanding of what I’m being asked. I *assume* I am going to be asked for *something*.”

“There are many things that we must do if we are going to make it into Tarsdejeh for *Nowruz* of 1995,” he said.

³¹ *hamkhâneh* (lit. “together [in] house”), meaning “roommates” but in this context implying “living together and sharing a bed.”

³² “*Areh, digeh!*” (lit. “Yes, already!”) Especially in the context of pointing at the elephant in the room, most closely translated as: “No *shit*, Sherlock!”

³³ *Jâm-e-Jam* (lit. “Jam[shid]’s Cup/Bowl”) The Cup (or Bowl) of [Shah] Jamshid is a mythically famed bowl one could gaze into to know one’s future.

“Yes, yes. This *is* true. And by the way, thank you for your account of Mehrdad and me. It *was* like that. It warms my heart that you remember about the two of us.” She sounded almost as if she were wiping away a nostalgic tear. “That’s how we want to be remembered. Love *grows*. It’s not an arrow strike. Go on!”

“So,” he continued, “in order to get around the situation and still allow us to travel together as a couple while we are in Iran, I suggested that I can arrange to have a marriage certificate—”

“*Forged?*” Badria jumped in, completely catching Cyrus off his guard. “Is that it? *Sannad-e-ja’li?*”³⁴

“Yes. Exactly right.”

Badria Arashpour laughed so loudly that Drake had to pull the receiver from his ear. “Sweet boy! You certainly have *quite* a roundabout way of asking for something so *simple*.”

Cyrus’ heart skipped a beat at her nonchalant response, and at first he wondered if Salomeh had perhaps misjudged how her family might see the situation. “It’s a lot to ask family to play along,” he explained his earlier apprehension.

“*Gush kon, del-am-jun,*”³⁵ she began to explain her laughter, “Much of what goes on in day-to-day living passes us by without further inspection or reflection. I suggest you—at least as far as I *myself* am concerned—dismiss *any* idea that what you are asking of me might be *bisharaf*. You are the *child of my heart*.”

Drake gripped his coffee cup and for a moment was almost a thirteen-year-old boy being told his father was going to return and take him to the United States from the woman who had nurtured and protected him so closely even when his mother, her friend, had been alive.

“I will not snitch on my friends, now scattered, who have blotted a line of ink-on-a-page in order to be able to flee across those imaginary lines on maps. Persia is as old as Persepolis. Our borders have changed. What paper absolutely meant one day it did not mean the very next so many times in my own life that I now know that where my *right foot* sets roots also sits my *home*. No matter *what* is writ in that little book of *poetry* we carry.”

³⁴ *sannad-e-ja’li* (“fake/forged document”).

³⁵ “*Gush kon, del-am-jun*” (lit. “Make ear, dear heart”), “Listen, my beloved.”

She went on. “You have *my* blessings, Cyrus. Mehrdad’s as well, I’m certain. I can’t speak for the others, but they *will* agree to look aside about this; I’ll make sure they know where Mehrdad and I stand on this issue. They all know your heart, through my stories, and Soraya from having always been your friend. You and Salomeh do what you need to do in Tarsdejh to give Noushin *peace* at last.”

“I am touched,” Drake replied.

“I *thought* you were going to ask to borrow money,” she laughed. “Which I surely would have *given* you! We must write our own hemistiches or life will not rhyme on the final syllable.”

“*Bandeh-ye-shomâ az shomâ kheili mamnun hastam*,”³⁶ he thanked her.

“Oh keep your formal pomp for the border officials you’ll be showing those sham papers to, you golden-tongued courtier! And keep *all* this to yourself, except with *immediate* family. I’m speaking from my experience.” She then paused. “Now, tell me all about how you and Salomeh are doing. Everything. Just let me go get a cup of tea. Your call caught me off guard.”



After the long, detailed discussions Drake had on the phone with Salomeh’s parents, he was able to satisfy them that his reasons for going there and for taking her with him under a false marital status were absolutely aboveboard, and they agreed that they would, from that point forward, consider the two married.

Having the papers forged proved inexpensive enough, since Drake’s student had more than one original in his templates to choose from and was, therefore, able to pick one from a state that required little effort and expense. After a few international long-distance calls and by participating in some gingerly applied facilitation payments to smoothly bypass certain questions, they had a written acceptance-in-principle on their visas to enter Iran as a married couple, she as a German and he as an American.

³⁶ “*Bandeh-ye-shomâ az shomâ kheili mamnun hastam*” would be a *very* formal and personally deprecating way of saying “I thank you very much [for this].”

Since both their criminal records were clear, the only thing raised as a minor concern was his history as a USMC sergeant and his early service in Vietnam; however, since the officials had no trouble finding Cyrus' Iranian birth and early school records, and his reputation as a painter completely justified a trip to sketch nature in the land of his birth during a time President Rafsanjani was seeking to lessen tensions in relations with the diaspora, he had very little difficulty overall compared to how it might have gone based on stories he had heard on the grapevine.

Two conditions noted in their visas were that they must stay at the home of a blood relative of Cyrus or Salomeh and then travel only as far as they could walk. Travel to and from the village was to be by the same driver, and then only upon formal approval. The requirement to stay with blood-family proved a difficult requirement to meet, since all of the Arashpour family had moved from Iran in '69, a decade before the '79 Revolution, to practice medicine outside of the sometimes-restrictive framework of the Shah's "White Revolution," thus pushing their lives and careers out of Iran and into Germany.

This made staying with Salomeh's family impossible, as there were none still in Mazandaran. Drake had not known it before doing the research, but his maternal grandfather had a brother, his great uncle, who in turn had a daughter, which made Mrs. Karimi his mother's cousin, and thus his first cousin once removed. This was deemed enough of a family tie to stay with them if they agreed in writing to have them as guests. It took very little persuasion for Drake to receive the required letter of invitation from Mr. Karimi, since, as the old man put it on the phone, "It would be nice to have some family we have not seen one thousand times over to visit us on *Nowruz*"

When the immigration official at the UN Permanent Mission of Iran in New York finally held up the officiating stamp over Cyrus Drake's visa, he communicated, solemnly, "Remember, Mr. Drake, that you and your wife are visiting Iran underwritten not *only* on *your* honor, but on the honor of the *entire* Karimi family. Do not treat your hosts' honor *lightly*. Swear or affirm."

"On my beloved deceased mother's *soul*," he pledged his solemn oath as the stamp met the paper.

"May she have peace," the official added. "Enjoy *Nowruz*."

Tarsdejh, Iran, March 1995

The end of winter came, and they were in Teheran, waiting for the arranged and approved ride from Mr. Afghani, a close friend of the Karimis who owned a car able to make the round trip the two times it would be needed. The drive northward out of Teheran proper was totally confusing to Drake, but when they reached the outermost limits of the city, things slowly became familiar to him again. It was well into the night that Mr. Afghani first spoke.

“We are entering Mazandaran Province,” he said. He then continued looking forward and driving without saying another word or even so much as humming to himself.

The day was breaking as the Caspian Sea came into sight. Salomeh had never been in Iran, never seen the Caspian of her forefathers. Her mouth was agape when she saw it for the first time in her life.

“*Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn?*” she said.

“Pardon? I don’t yet speak that much German.”

“Do you know the land where the lemon trees bloom?” she translated from Goethe.³⁷

“I do ken,” he replied. “It blooms in this here old Paykan.”³⁸

“Oh? Such a lovely thing as that? Right *here*?” Her smile was magnificent in its display of her clear joy.

“Yes. Wilderness is paradise *anow*,”³⁹ he explained. “Right *here*. Right now.”

³⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “*Kennst du das Land*,” *Mignon*.

³⁸ The Paykan, a common Iranian domestic model car from 1967 to 2005.

³⁹ “Wilderness is paradise *anow*,” a fragment of FitzGerald’s translation of Khayyam’s quatrain, Jackson’s translation of which on page 8.

When the three finally arrived in Tarsdejh, Salomeh woke Drake, who had fallen asleep with his head bouncing against the window. The car had no seatbelts, so sleeping with his head in Salomeh's lap would have been easy but would not have gone over well with the stern driver. Mr. Afghani helped them remove their luggage from the trunk, gave a polite smile, and drove off without a word. Drake walked to the door, knocked, and waited. Mrs. Karimi answered the door with a big smile.

"Mr. Cyrus Drake?" she said. "My cousin's son?"

Drake wondered if he was not still asleep in the back seat of Mr. Afghani's car, dreaming, for Manijeh Karimi looked almost exactly the way Noushin Drake, née Hayadarzadeh, might have, had she not walked into the Caspian Sea.

Know'st thou the Land, where the lemon trees bloom,
Amongst dark leaves, golden oranges grow,
A gentle wind from the blue sky doth blow,
While the myrtle stands still and the laurel high?
Know'st thou *this* well?
There! There!
I wish to go with thee, my Beloved.

Know'st thou the house? Its room rests on columns,
Its hall gleams, its chamber shimmers,
And marble statues stand and gaze at me:
"What have they done to thee, poor child?"
Know'st thou *this* well?
There! There!
I wish to go with thee, my Protector.

Know'st thou the mountain and its cloud-paths?
The mule searches for its way in the fog;
The dragon's ancient brood dwells in caves;
The rock collapses and the flood falls over it.
Know'st thou *this* well?
There! There!
Let's go on our way, O Paladin, let's go!⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Translation due to Jackson.

The next day, Mrs. Karimi served a large lunch as everyone sat around the colorful cloth that served as the Karimis' table. It was awkward at first for Drake to sit cross-legged on the ground as he had as a guest at such settings when he was a boy, but he soon was able to sit with little discomfort.

"So, Mr. Drake, you are a teacher, like me," Mr. Karimi, who was near the age most men retired in America, began a conversation.

"I teach at an art college," Drake replied as he rolled up pita bread around a chunk of baked potato and onion and dipped it into some yogurt.

"Art. I teach in high school," Mr. Karimi said. "I have a few days off now, for my honored guests, but that's what I do. High school."

"It's an honest living," Drake said.

"Yes. It's not the same since the Revolution, though."

"How's that?" Salomeh cut in.

"Well, Mrs. Drake, you must understand that, before the Revolution, many were the vanguard of change. It was our sacred trust to bring in change and introduce competent methods. To help show the children how to think for themselves—"

"Now, now, Karimi!" Mrs. Karimi chided with an almost mischievous smile. "Don't start your 'vanguard' speech. These are our honored guests! What are you thinking to bring our honored guests into the web of your 'vanguard' speech, My Dearest Heart? Normal minds tire of such talk quickly.... They'll be *swimming* back to their home if you keep it up...."

“They are from America,” Mr. Karimi said to his wife, who was busy putting more rice on Drake’s plate. “They come from a different culture. But before that, they are first and foremost *tâyefeh o khânehvâdeh-ye-mâ*⁴¹ and as such, we will speak as freely in confidence as the thick walls here allow. I want Mrs. Drake to know what we *Iranian* Iranians are about. You see, Mrs. Drake, in the days of Shah, a great many of us free thinkers saw right through the so-called ‘White Revolution’ of Shah and taught what we damned well pleased. We read our Paolo Freire by candlelight and Pahlavi in public, King of Kings be damned!”

“Karimi! Your foul *language* in front of the *lady!*” the old woman chastised her husband.

Mr. Karimi laughed happily at his wife’s response. “She’s always telling me to shut up. In America, they swear like soldiers *right there on television*, My Dearest Heart. Just this one day, I’ll swear in front of our guests. Just this *one* day.”

“So, you were saying?” Salomeh insisted.

Drake continued to stuff his mouth with the good food he was being offered and listened without comment.

“I was saying that we saw through the nonsense of Shah’s ‘White Revolution.’ To begin with, it was too top-down, and real change begins in the heads of children, not out the ass-ends of fiat-farting bureaucrats. A good many of us dedicated teachers, well, we just ‘disappeared’ and we were never to be seen again, thanks to those five-letter-words.”

“Pardon?” Salomeh asked for clarification. “Five...?”

“Five-letter-words,” he repeated. He walked to a saltshaker and tossed a shake over his left shoulder just as he audibly whispered, “*SAVAK*.”⁴²

Upon hearing the most forbidden word, Mrs. Karimi audibly gasped as if inhaling a pin. After pounding her chest as if to dislodge it from her windpipe, she stood, walked to a small portrait hanging in a prominent location near where she’d been sitting, and touched the sun-faded portrait gently. “The five-letter *bastards!*” she openly swore.

⁴¹ *tâyefeh o khânehvâdeh-ye-mâ* (“our clan and family”).

⁴² SAVAK (from *Sazeman-e-Etela’at va Amniyat-e-Keshvar*) lit. “Organization of Intelligence and National Security,” Shah’s *notorious* secret police.

“And I’ll swear as much as I want to about what they did to our son in my own house. I’ll swear it loudly from the top of Damavand! May it erupt as I toss them in!”⁴³ She then sat down.

After putting the shaker back and brushing his shoulder, he continued, “And then, the Revolution came, and compared to the time of the Shah, well, let’s say that Shah’s system looked like *day* compared to that.”

“How so?” Drake finally interjected.

“It feels as though my job under the new system is merely to be a rote nostalgia monger. There seems little interest in anything genuinely substantial to allow us to build critical consciousness in the youth in the approved curriculum, at least not as it reaches our small part of Mazandaran. At least I retire soon, *ensh-Allah*.”

After he had emptied his plate, Drake asked if he could use the phone. At the phone, he took out his wallet and found the number he had tracked down with the help of the international operator during the overnight layover in Germany. He dialed the number slowly, since the digits on the phone were in Persian script but the number he had written was not.

The phone rang a foreign-sounding ring, until finally, an old male voice answered. “Yes? Yes?”

“May I speak with Mr. Suleiman Hajj, please?” Drake said.

“Who wants me?” the old voice demanded.

“Cyrus Drake.”

The phone obviously dropped at the other end. Finally, it was picked up again, and the same voice, now somewhat clearer, said, “*Piâz-e-kuchulu*?”⁴⁴

“Yes.” Suleiman had always called Drake that, since he said Drake’s head had been shaped somewhat like a white onion as a baby. “Though it’s been enough years since last we talked that I’m far more *bozorg o shikasteh*⁴⁵ than *kuchulu*.”

“You calling overseas?”

“No, I am in Tarsdejh right now.”

Again the phone was dropped.

⁴³ Mount Damavand is the tallest mountain in Iran (5,610 m; 18,406 ft.) and is an inactive volcano.

⁴⁴ *piâz-e-kuchulu*, from *piâz* (onion) and *kuchulu* (little/tiny, from *kuchik*).

⁴⁵ *bozorg o shikasteh* (“big and broken”).

“Why? Where?”

“I am at the house of my mother’s cousin, Manijeh Karimi.”

“Yes, I know that family. Your cousin. Please say *salâm* to the Karimi family on my behalf.”

Drake assured the man that he would, and then said, “I want to meet with you and discuss some matters.”

“Some matters,” Suleiman Hajj said. “I think I know the ‘matters’ you want to discuss. When would you like to meet?”

“How about the day after *Nowruz*?” Drake suggested. “I’m tied up with social obligations until then. I want us both to have a clear mind when we talk.”

“Yes. *Nowruz* has me all tied up, as well. Where?”

Drake had not been in Tarsdejh for years, but a name came to his mind. “Is that teahouse still around these days? *Peimâneh* something.”⁴⁶

“*Fenjâni âb-e-daryâ*?”⁴⁷ Suleiman said. “It is, indeed, still standing, although it’s now *only* a teahouse with some small food dishes as well if you wish to eat. When?”

“Near noon?”

“Okay. Understood. I *will* be there,” Suleiman confirmed

“Good.”

“You have made an old heart very glad to hear your voice, little onion,” Suleiman said before hanging up.

Drake returned to the others and found that the conversation had drifted from teaching to other, less consequential things. Time passed quickly, and after dinner, Drake and Salomeh retired to their tiny guest room.

“Whom did you phone?” Salomeh asked as she removed the head covering that she wore even indoors for the benefit of the Karimis.

“Someone I used to know.”

“Here in Tarsdejh? After how many years?”

“Salomeh-*aziz*,” Cyrus said gently.

“Yes?” she asked, flipping her long, black hair loose. She looked over at him as he reclined on the single-sized bed. “What is it?” she asked.

⁴⁶ *Peimâneh* (cupful), a classically poetic measure of a cup by volume.

⁴⁷ *Fenjâni âb-e-daryâ* (“A Cupful of Seawater”).

“*Ich liebe dich*,” he said.⁴⁸

Salomeh’s reaction was far more actively intense than he had anticipated it would be. Looking him straight in the eyes, she said, “*Qasam bekhor, aziz-am*,⁴⁹ do *not* say things you don’t mean. Because my heart longs more than my ears to hear it. The last man who said *that* is a bitter regret in my bed and heart.”

“I *do*, Salomeh,” he finally admitted in English. “I do love you. That’s why I said it in German, so your *heart* would feel it and receive it without so much as a *flash* of translation.” It had been a hard thing to say—his heart was trying to find a way to escape from his chest—but it had finally been said, and a little bit of the weight of not ever having said it to *any* woman in his entire life since an early age was lifted from him.

Salomeh’s large eyes glazed over completely with tears, and she put her hands on her cheeks as the tears streamed her feelings down her flushed face. Drake stood up from the bed and went over to put his arms around her. “Why are you crying?” he asked.

“I am so happy beyond my own words, Cyrus,” she returned, almost inaudibly. “*Man khodam ham, to râ dust darm, del-am aziz-e-man, âsheqetam, Kurosham*.”⁵⁰

“You are *not* the same Salomeh I first met on my arrival at my father’s funeral,” he said.

“How am I not?” she said. The tears had brought back her thick German accent more than usual.

“You are gentler. But I don’t mean that you are in any way weak. Just less keen to try to shock.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “It’s as if you have always been a starry-eyed romantic, rather than someone simply looking to shock others.”

“A romantic? There’s nothing wrong with treasuring and bathing in another’s love. That’s a human feeling of joy, more than romance. And by the way, I’ve never *tried* to shock you; *you* were shocked by me. Remember that there’s a difference.”

“Indeed,” he agreed.

⁴⁸ “*Ich liebe dich*” (“I love you”).

⁴⁹ “*Qasam bekhor, aziz-am*” (lit “swear to God, my dear”).

⁵⁰ “I *my very self* also love you, my dear heart, lover [of mine], my Cyrus.” The first-person phrase *man* (I) followed by *khodam* (myself) places a tone of deep and explicit personal agency and investment into her declaration. Her words are very strong and are in keeping with her earlier demand for an oath of sincerity.

“Wearing white to a funeral, a kiss in an attic, a photo of your mother placed into a book so you may have it to keep her memory when you one day wish to see her face again.”

Drake’s face went pale at the mention of his mother, and she continued, “These are not *shocking* behaviors. This is how the living *live* life amongst the living.” She put a palm of each hand on his cheeks and stared deeply into his eyes as her own engulfed him and held him transfixed there. “Not shocking at all. You are *projecting* onto me. Perhaps even *looking* for reasons to stay on your side of a wall I had *nothing* at all to do with erecting.” She gave his nose a quick kiss. “I’ve plenty of messes and flaws of my own to account for without any need for your vainglorious *shock-and-awe*. And I suspect you witness far more shocking behavior in an all-male social setting in full view of the public eye than I’ve *ever* manifested in a shuttered attic.”

Her keen words immediately drew his mind to the toxically masculine crew at The Syncopated Cup and the kinds of things that they were prone to say in their Friday night banter sessions, and he felt a deeply wrenching dry heave, perhaps made worse by the exhaustion of travel, but certainly triggered by Salomeh’s adept disclosure of what she had exposed as his internalized ugly double standard; a standard he had, indeed, somehow become *too* comfortable with, or at least far too *tolerant* of, over his long time inside his compartmentalized, hermetically sealed life as a casually unattached and disconnected dandy.

“Yes, you’re absolutely right,” he finally admitted to her. “I’ve been afraid to tell you I love you because I knew when I did that, our relationship would become something more real, more solid, and less enigmatic. Moreover, there certainly *is* our age difference. It takes stars in one’s eyes to see past all that.”

He took in a deep, considered breath, before continuing, “I have been a witness to and participant in the world of my own male privilege and the many self-serving perspectives this has sometimes effortlessly afforded me. A world where just my *being* with you makes me a ‘lucky man’ because of your beauty and relative youth. Even in the haze of my male privilege and societal factors such as that, though, I am well enough in my own skin to know that the most important factor in my love for you is the person I have come to know across these months together.”

He took a deep breath and allowed himself to be calm in his own ecstatic joy, finally saying, “I have come to cherish those aspects of us that time polishes rather than tarnishes.”

“To be honest, Cyrus, we *both* have to see far beyond each other’s age. I have to see something in an older man, raised for decades in and by the wretched Patriarchy, and you have to see something in a younger woman, raised by my mother and by Badria herself to call such bullshit what it is and not be ashamed when I do so. It isn’t as simple as just sleeping together. I know that. I am very, very happy to hear that you have seen and loved my *core*, for that is the part of myself I treasure most about my own personhood. It is the only part that won’t fall to dust.”

She held his hands in hers and gently stroked the back of his right. “I’ve had way too many years in dance to think that the heart and body always go hand-in-hand. We both have tasted our share of sour wine at the festival. But now, love, the wine is sweet, not sour, so *mei noush!*”⁵¹

“What scares me most, I suppose, is that it is so hard for me to *change*, at my age. You will grow, and change, and develop. I have become like a statue. I don’t want those pieces to stick and get projected like that. You were right when you declared me the ungrateful King of Rome, but I didn’t see the full beauty of my own life. I felt unworthy of joy, let alone praise or acclaim. Yes, let’s indeed drink wine, love.”

“You *do* change,” she insisted. “You’ve done it more than once right in front of me just in the time we’ve known one another.”

“How so?”

“It must have taken some change and growth for you to be able to admit you love me, and to slowly put aside your constant ingratitude,” she explained. “And you’ve been sketching lately, which, while not painting, is three steps from where you were in that attic when we first kissed.”

“Yes. Maybe after I talk with Suleiman Hajj, there will be room in me for more change. It’s the last secret door to open on this journey of decades.”

⁵¹ *mei noush* (lit. “wine drink”) The call of the *sâqi* of poetry, inviting the poet to cross into ecstasy.

“He’s the specific reason we’re here in Tarsdejh, right? I guessed that when you left us to go phone someone.”

“Yes.”

She held Drake tightly and asked, “Can you tell me why?”

“Just that it has to do with my mother’s death,” Drake said. “Until I have all the facts, I would rather not speculate aloud and distort others’ lives when there’s no call for that. When I have everything I feel we came here to find, then I’ll share with you what I can confirm.”

“He has answers and details?”

Drake reclined and closed his eyes tightly. “Who knows? If not him, then no one does, but who knows what he may have new to say to me?” he finally said. Their cigarettes finished, they sat on the bed.

“About that kiss....” he tried to say.

Salomeh put her index finger across his lips. “I kissed you that day because I *wanted* you and we had *privacy* upstairs at Andrew’s,” she explained. “Pure *lust* on my part.”

Drake brushed the hair from her face to see her eyes more clearly. “I love *you*, Salomeh Arashpour of Heidelberg.”

“I love *you*, Cyrus Drake of Tarsdejh. Don’t go wondering these things so much, you troubled *rish-e-sefid*.”⁵² She leaned over to kiss him gently, slowly lowering her index finger so that her lips would cleanly meet his. “Now, *aziz-am*, shave that white philosopher’s beard of yours for the rest of the night and tell me you love me again and again and make love to me again and again, and then let’s fall deeply asleep afterward and not worry about when we should wake up.”

⁵² *rish-e-sefid* (whitebeard), here used in the sense of *philosopher* or *wise elder* or possibly even *overthinker*.

On the morning of *Nowruz*, Mrs. Karimi sent her three sons, Drake's cousins to some degree, called and considered his close kin, out into the town with bundles of food so that the elderly friends of her family who had no one since the war with Iraq with whom to share in the feasting would be better able to celebrate. Her guests started arriving before noon. By noon, the Karimi house was full of people from all parts of Tarsdejh.

Nowruz hereabouts was a time when families traditionally offered a feast to each and every comer—some invited, some not—that far surpassed their means, and the banquet offered by the Karimis proved no exception. Despite Iraj Karimi's meager teacher's salary and the financial strain of supporting a wife, three sons, two daughters, and the crippled mother who never left her small, attached suite at the back of the house, one overflowing plate of food after another came out from Mrs. Karimi's kitchen, until everyone, including Drake and Salomeh, had eaten so much rice, chicken, lamb, pickle, and candy that no one could move without groaning. Drake realized that a good part of the extravagance shown by the Karimis had been for his benefit as the son of Manijeh Karimi's kin, and he offered to help cover the expense of the affair with some of the money he had exchanged for *riâl* upon entering Iran. But in keeping with tradition, the Karimis flatly refused his offer, so he put a bundle of *riâl* under the bed in the guest room, knowing that Mrs. Karimi would only find it after he and Salomeh left. He was no longer certain what the rules of *ta'arof* said about such things, but the laws of economics prevailed in the Iranian economy, and he would be forgiven his rudeness for staving off bankruptcy.

After everyone had a glass of tea or yogurt drink in front of him, Mr. Karimi took out his *ney* and began playing a slow, pulsing song. As he played for the guests, an old lady who dared not take off her veil even inside the privacy of the house, began reciting Hafez. When the song and the verse were over, the old woman leaned over and whispered something to her husband.

“Mrs. Khazari wonders if *you* know any Persian poetry, Mr. Drake-*khân*,” her husband said in the politest Persian.

Drake replied to and through the old lady’s husband, “*Âqâ-khân* Khazari, please tell Mrs. Khazari that *bandeh-ye-shomâ* knows some verse.”⁵³

The old man looked at his wife and repeated as a formality what Drake had said, and Mrs. Khazari then asked by proxy if Drake would recite something.

“Mr. Karimi!” Drake exclaimed. “Would you please play something that reminds us of the sea? I have a promise to keep.”

When Mr. Karimi had complied, Drake closed his eyes and began to recite from the gossamer *nastaliq*⁵⁴ the Hajj poem he had memorized well in Persian over the last months:

Let me begin, O sea of my ancestors,
by washing my nostrils with your foam
and thrusting my rope-torn hands
deeply into your cool, salty water
and bending my back to your crashing
while the seabirds cry out like muezzins
before the morning finally arrives.

Let me wash and do my ablutions,
O sea, in your water, that I may be
clean and fully proper to bend down
and pound my creased forehead into your sand
while the fishermen cast their nets
and make the pulling-in of
full-to-bursting nets their prayer motions.

⁵³ To refer to oneself as *bandeh* (servant) even by 1995 perhaps sounds dated. This and the honorific *âqâ-khân* suggests they are of high community standing.

⁵⁴ *Nastaliq* is a flowing Persian calligraphic hand often used to render verse.

Let me stand up with you to my girded loins,
O sea! I jump into your waters and we are wed,
and the gulls are our maids-in-waiting,
screaming like warbling wedding criers.

You embrace me, and dance with me, as the
fishing craft on the horizon play our
festival song, and the ropes of their rigging
sing like the stringed instruments to the wind,
and fog horns howl like reed flutes, and
waves pound the shore like a finger drum,
and my heart beats like a *santur* hammer.

I have done my cleansing, I have done my prayer,
I have made straight the fine matters of dowry,
I have asked the blessings of God,
I have made myself clean for the wedding bed,
and now there is only a thin sheet of froth
and salt, and sand as I lift up your veil,
O sea, and look into your face as if
this is the very first time I have seen.

After the festival has reached its peak,
with the wine heavily on my breath,
I will put my head on your pillow,
your watery pillow, and fall asleep,
O frothing sea, at the cool hem of your
dress, on my hands and knees as the water
dissolves under my hands and washes from
under my knees until they touch small stones.

Your sand is in my ears, my nose, my eyes,
my hair. How can I taste the salt of your kiss,
O sea! I can no longer hear the birds,
and I can no longer see or hear the boat-instruments
because I have fallen entirely to your
beside, wrapped and gently held in your
pitch black tresses, held by your constant arms
until only the spray of eternity remains ashore.

No one in the room spoke when Drake had finished. Finally, Mr. Karimi said, "I am amazed to hear a Hajj poem from an American-raised man, Iranian-born or not! You have done both your mother's whole village and Hajj very, very proud!"

"Will you be staying for the thirteenth day after *Nowruz*?" Mrs. Khazari asked directly, as if the recitation of the poem had made Drake family. "You could be our guests in the country for *Sizdah Bedar*⁵⁵ since you missed *Chaharshanbeh Suri*."⁵⁶

"Your offer is very kind, Khazari-*khânom-e-mohtaram*,⁵⁷ but I'm afraid we cannot," Drake replied. "Salomeh and I will be leaving Iran before then to return to New York, *ensh-Allah*."

"*Ensh-Allah! Kurosh Tarsdehzhadeh-khân*,"⁵⁸ elder Khazari almost whispered in that kind of whisper actually meant to carry through the room, "You are a fortunate man. Welcome home."

To have been addressed in this way, bestowed with this ceremonial surname by elder Karimi, even if only a fleeting social grace, sang joy inside him of his return home. He could see an ignition of star-fire in Salomeh's eyes. "You, too, are very fortunate, *ma sha 'Allah, Hakim*,"⁵⁹ he replied.

"I, too, am very fortunate, *ensh-Allah*," Khazari returned.

The merrymaking continued late into the day, with people coming and going as is the tradition on New Year's Day, until finally everyone had gone and Salomeh helped the other women clean the incredible mess that the merrymakers left behind. When finally alone with their two guests, Mr. and Mrs. Karimi thanked them both profusely for their delightfully unexpected fluency with age-old Persian group social customs and culture, especially during the community-wide celebration of *Nowruz*.

⁵⁵ *Sizdah* (thirteen) *Bedar* (outdoors), an ancient Persian festival that follows *Nowruz* by thirteen days; it often involves picnics and outings with friends and family. It marks the end of Persian New Year's festivities.

⁵⁶ *Chaharshanbeh Suri* (lit. "Scarlet/Festive Wednesday"), a festival dating back to Zoroastrian antiquity in Iran, celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before *Nowruz*, often involving attendees running and jumping over fires in the evening in a purification ritual meant to put last year's grief to the flame.

⁵⁷ Khazari-*khânom-e-mohtaram* ("Honorable Mrs. Khazari").

⁵⁸ "God willing! Lord Cyrus, Child-of-Tarsdeh."

⁵⁹ Here, *Hakim*, is an honorific denoting wisdom and knowledge, arising from age and lived experience rather than formal education, and *ma sha 'Allah* is an invocation pleading that good fortune, being from Allah, not be envied or upset.

The passing of two generations had not changed the old teahouse under the sign that read in dark Kufic script: *Fenjâni âb-e-daryâ*. “A cupful of seawater,” Drake said as he passed the threshold of the place. Once inside, he was overcome by the smell of the greasy *koubideh* and oily, saffron-stained rice. The faintly acid smell of roasted tomatoes and scalded tea also filled his nostrils.

“*Salâm*, mister,” the teahouse keeper, a fat, balding man with large black moustaches, said. “Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year to you, too,” Drake replied.

“What will it be?” the keeper asked enthusiastically as he approached with a pot full of tea in his pudgy hand.

“I would like some ground lamb with roasted tomato on oily rice,” Drake replied, “and that whole pot of tea with some cube sugar.” He sat in a chair that faced the window on the north side of the teahouse. He did not remember *Fenjâni* ever having had windows in its day as an opium den for melancholy poets and recitation-mongers. Now it had a full window, however, and he could see out onto the Caspian Sea and watch the fishing boats making their rounds far across the water.

“Yes, sir!” the keeper said as he poured a steaming glass for Drake. “Are you Iranian? Afghani? You speak with an accent right out of the time of Mosaddeq. I don’t recognize you at all.”

Drake took a closer look at the man. They were about as old as one another, but the teahouse keeper showed his age more from having lived so long near the sea. “I used to live in Tarsdejh. I was *born* here,” he said. Cyrus *Tarsdejhzadeh*. He felt that name inside, too. “Many, many years ago.”

“Born *here*? What is your family?” the keeper asked, wiping some sweat from his leathery forehead with a cloth.

“My mother was the daughter of Nozratollah Hayadarzadeh, and my father was an American,” Drake replied. He did not know if it would be safe to admit to being half-American in these days after the Islamic Revolution, but he felt comfortable saying it here. Since he had already been made as a foreigner, he felt obliged to establish his pedigree and *bona fides* to this local, so as to fit within the mental hierarchy the man was obviously trying to place him in. Family. Clan. Village.

“Hayadarzadeh! Yes, I remember that family. And I *sure* do remember old Nozra. We used to call that one Nozra-Din! That branch of the family all died of tuberculosis years back, long before the Revolution.”

“Yes, TB. You’ll probably remember about Nozra that he was a real friend of the bird flower,” Drake returned. “I am actually amazed it took TB to kill him.”

“I’ve worked around here since I was a *boy*. I used to carry hookah bowls to the old men in my day.”

“I remember those days well,” Drake said. “Maybe you and I even played together as children. It’s quite likely.”

“Perhaps.” The man wiped away his sweat again and said with a yellow-stained grin, “I can’t remember you, though. Too much of that funny smoke, perhaps?” He laughed as he went to prepare the meal. “I’ve had a couple of concussions in my past, to be honest. I’ve fallen off a few cliffs. Some parts are misty.”

When his meal was set in front of him, Drake deeply inhaled the steam from the food. Mrs. Karimi’s food had already brought him back to Persian cooking, but the ground lamb and rice he now ate reminded him of his mother’s cooking more than Mrs. Karimi’s fancier New Year’s meal had.

The teahouse keeper walked right over to Drake’s table after Drake had finished about half his food and refilled the teapot. “How long has it been since you were last here?”

“I left a few years after my mother died.”

“When was that?”

“I stayed with the family friends of my mother until my father returned from the Korean War.”

“Korean War? When was that, again?”

“About the same time Mohammad Mosaddeq was removed from government,” Drake said so that the man would understand the time frame. “More or less. Maybe not exactly, but those were the years. I left in 1953.”

“That long ago? This explains your... *historical*... accent.”

“Yes. That probably does explain why my Persian accent and vocabulary are kind of stuck in that era.”

The man looked over his shoulders and said, “You might have stayed around for a while, had Mosaddeq not been ousted in that coup.” He then continued his work, which seemed to consist of turning *kebab* on a spit and watching the grease flames jump up once in a while. “I think I *do* remember you: Cyrus?”

“Well met!” Drake called out. “And your name again?”

“Ali Alizadeh,” he said.

“Indeed! I remember you, too, Ali!”

“What a New Year this has been,” Alizadeh said with a huge grin. “Nice to see you again! Took me a while, but it came back!”

Cyrus Drake knew that if he sat in this place long enough, and drank enough tea, he would slowly be transformed, and it did not bother him to realize this as much as he once thought it might have. Sometime into his reverie, an old man with a limp came through the front door of the place and approached him.

“*Khodâyâ!*”⁶⁰ Drake exclaimed when he saw the old man, who was dressed in what looked rougher than sackcloth. “Are you a Sufi now, Suleiman Hajj?”

Ali Alizadeh quickly came to the table and poured the old man some tea and asked what he wanted to eat.

“I am fine,” Suleiman declined food. “*Salâm,*” he finally said to Drake. His eyes were old and clouded over with their years, and his face—the parts not covered by his ample white beard—was leathery from years on the fishing boats, but Drake could see that, under all the leather of time, Suleiman Hajj still shone through in the sparkle right at the pupils of his gaze.

“How is your health?” Drake returned.

“My health is good, *ensh-Allah*, but of course I am old, and endure all that comes with age,” Suleiman replied. “You are not the wiry boy you used to be, either. How is your health, then?”

⁶⁰ “*Khodâyâ!*” (“God!”), used here as an exclamation upon being startled.

“I am well in body, but there is more to our old age than just creaking bones and sore old wounds, Sully-*jân*.”

“How is your father?”

“He died last July,” Drake returned.

The old poet bowed his head and said something in Arabic, and then raised his head again. “He was a bit older than I. It was his rightful time and place, I hope?”

“Peaceful at the very end of it, I’ve been told by my uncle. His funeral wasn’t unpleasant. He was well-honored.”

“I suspect there was a great army of veterans there?”

“Yes.” He pushed away his plate of food and looked straight at the old man’s face. “As I said, there is more to old age than sore bones,” he said calmly and with purpose.

“I know. I was startled when you called me and said you were in Tarsdejh. I know *why* you’re here, though. There is only *one* reason why you would be here, since visiting those distant relatives of yours can’t mean much to you.”

“They’re lovely people and well worth the visit, but yes.” Drake rubbed his hands together, reached into his pocket, and lit a cigarette. “I want to tell you a story,” he said.

“A story?”

Drake let the bead of his cigarette be his brazier and the creaking stool he sat on his stage as he unwound the carpet of a tale that had brought him back to the town of his birth, and as he spoke, Suleiman Hajj made a perfect and intense audience of one. Even the busy boats outside on the water seemed to stop and listen.

Tarsdejh, Iran, June 1950

“The Race”

“Father, where are we going for my birthday?” Cyrus asked the man behind the white-and-black shield of the newspaper.

“Wait until your mother comes with dinner,” Mr. Drake replied. “I’ll tell you then.” He then continued with his reading until Noushin pushed open the kitchen door and carried a huge cooking pot over to the table. When she sat, her husband put aside his paper, bowed his head, and gave thanks, as was the custom in the Drake household. Later into the meal, Cyrus again asked his father where the family would be going to celebrate his birthday. Ever since he could remember, the family had been going out for his birthday. “Will we all go to *Takht-e-Suleimân* again?”⁶¹ he asked with hope in his voice.

“Listen to what I have to say to your mother,” was the reply.

“Yes, Ansel?” Noushin said, her soft brown eyes shining with curiosity. “What do you want to tell me?”

“I’ve volunteered to fight in Korea,” he answered, taking a full spoon of fish stew to his lip. “I’m scheduled to depart in two weeks. Sorry to say, Cyrus, that Solomon’s Throne would take us a full week round trip, all told. Our ’40 DeSoto S7 wouldn’t likely endure the short trip to Ramsar Palace, let alone go over the Alborz, and with tight timing we just can’t take the risk.”

Noushin’s normally ruddy face went stark white at Ansel’s blunt announcement. “Korea? For what?” she demanded when she could no longer hold her tongue.

⁶¹ *Takht-e-Suleimân* (Solomon’s Throne), an ancient Persian archaeological site located in West Azerbaijan Province, Iran, renowned for its historical and cultural significance. In 1950, it may well have been a two-day road trip from Northwestern Mazandaran Province, given the route over the Alborz mountains.

“I am an American. An officer by service. Even though I’ve been allowed to stay on here in Iran because of you and me and the boy, it is still my duty as an American to fight for its interests, both here and abroad,” he replied. “The Communists cannot be allowed to push too far into—”

“But Uncle Sully isn’t going to fight in Korea, Father,” Cyrus interrupted, trying to sound as meek as he could, so as not to stir any wrath.

“Well, he has some *good* reasons for that,” Mr. Drake calmly explained. “Suleiman took a bullet in the leg during the War and the thing nearly crippled him, you see. That’s why he spent all that time in London doing non-combat duty at the ass-end. The doctor says his leg is bad, so the army wouldn’t take him on when he went to volunteer for duty in Korea.”

“Bad leg?” the boy asked, not believing it. “He can outrun me in a race without *any* problem. Every time.”

“In a short sprint, maybe,” Mr. Drake replied. “You’re not a screaming soldier with a bayonet ready for his spine. The leg wouldn’t hold up under *those* conditions, and you can guess where poor Sully would be then. One tight situation like that and he’d be as bugged as Achilles at Troy. I would love to have him with us, but here he stays, I’m afraid to have to say.”

“What about Arashpour?” Noushin asked. “He’s as healthy as a hill goat in Azerbaijan. Is he going to Korea with you? I am not happy about any of this,” she told her husband. “It’s only a handful of years since I’ve been able to sleep without fearing you’d be shot over in Europe, and now I may have to go through more years of the same awful thing.”

“Cyrus, you have some wood to go chop, son.” Ansel Drake waved his son out of the room with a commanding brush of the folded newspaper.

“Yes, Father,” Cyrus said before asking to leave the table.

The Drakes lived in a small house just outside Tarsdejh, a child’s five-minute run to the sea. Cyrus loved to go to the shore and look out over the water whenever he had any free time to himself. But since this was his night to split wood, he could not go there without sure punishment. Once outside, he felt inspired by the mild air to split as much locust wood as he could get done in that one night.

Perhaps if he did an impressive job, he reasoned, his father would reward him by taking him somewhere for his birthday before leaving for Korea. He chopped wood diligently and with purpose, until he heard a loud noise from inside the house.

“How *dare* you volunteer without discussing it with *me!*” his mother screamed. Cyrus had never heard her voice ring so much louder than his father’s.

“Noushin! Calm down!” Ansel Drake screamed in reply.

“You bastard of *bastards!*” Again, a crash followed her screams. “Show up in Iran with your parade of ‘Civil Engineers,’ have a child with me, go to Europe.... I’m not—nor is your son—some *door* to be swung open and closed at your *whim!*”

“Noushin! Can’t we be *rational* about this?”

Cyrus could not decide if he should continue with the wood or interfere with his parents’ vile argument for their sake. He had never heard them shout so loudly at one another in the entire time since his father had returned from Europe. He decided to neither chop wood nor interfere but instead ran to the water to watch the moon to the east on the Caspian.

Shimmering in watery hunger, the moon *almost* appeared more menacing when reflected off the sea, far more than even the largest problems in Cyrus’ life. But the sea was the most menacing entity in all of Mazandaran Province; the moon had *never* taken a life. He watched the Caspian for this reason, as fear of the sea made *his* life dull and safe

“Here again, young Drake?” someone asked from the dark.

“Is that you, Sully?” The boy squinted at the distant figure.

“None other,” the man replied, stepping closer so that he could be seen. “You know, the water cannot hear whatever sours your heart. Maybe you could tell me about your troubles, and then I could help you.”

“Father and Mother are having a real *rank* row of it,” Cyrus explained. “I didn’t want to listen to them yelling at one another, so I came here.”

“To look at the sea.”

“It calms me,” Cyrus tried to explain. “You know, it awes me so that I’m too scared to be afraid. Sort of like the mullah says you’re supposed to fear God—except that I fear the sea. It sounds silly. The fear calms me, inside, in a strange way.”

“Only silly to some,” Suleiman disagreed. “I like to look out over the Caspian myself,” he admitted. “How else would I have known that you come here so often? I see you here very often, but I just haven’t stepped out to greet you.”

“Please don’t tell my father I was down here tonight,” Cyrus begged. “I’m supposed to be splitting wood right now. They were fighting, so I thought they wouldn’t notice this one time.”

“Between men,” Suleiman assured the boy. “I shan’t say so much as a word to anyone. Do you want to hear a poem I’ve been working on?”

“A poem?”

“Yes.”

“Persian or English?”

“I’m writing it in Persian. I’m not as good with English as you are, little onion.”

“I’d rather not hear the poem now,” Cyrus finally admitted.

“It’s about the sea,” Suleiman pressed.

“Maybe later,” Cyrus insisted.

For a very long time, the two of them stood side by side and looked out over the water. Cyrus finally decided to return to his wood pile and left Suleiman. When he finished his chores, he entered the house quietly, saw that his parents had gone to sleep, and went to his room. He, too, was soon fast asleep.



As they walked home from the house of the man who would be driving Ansel Drake to Teheran, Cyrus and Noushin mumbled curses under their breath for different reasons. Cyrus because he would not be with his father on his coming birthday, and Noushin because she easily may never again see her husband alive. Badria Arashpour walked beside them and cursed him for both reasons.

“Back when you two married,” Badria bemoaned, “you were his Roksana, and he was your Eskander!”⁶²

⁶² In 327 BCE, Alexander the Great married Roxana, a Bactrian princess, thus helping him secure his role in the newly conquered Persian Empire. They had one son, born after Alexander’s death in 323 BCE, murdered in 309 BCE.

“I understood when he went to *Europe*,” Noushin replied. “Those were different times and different forces at play. This is something completely unlike that. This honestly feels more like *Ákhil dar Trovâ*⁶³ to me, and we all know how *that* story ends.”

“In whatever the history, they always end up leaving widows and orphans to remember their stories. I’m telling you, Noushin-jân, the man is a *scoundrel*,” Badria said. “Going off to fight in a war that has *nothing* to do with Iran *or* America, really.” She pulled her daughter Soraya by the arm. “If my Mehrdad ever did a stupid thing like that, I tell you what *I* would do.”

“What *would* you do, Badria?” Noushin sighed.

“I’d grab the first steed in sight and be on my way to hiding out with him in Persepolis,” she laughed. “We’d burn like no two have ever burned for each other before. What’s the use of being sent to Gehenna if you can’t burn a little *before* you get there? You know, to prepare yourself for the flames yet to come.”

“Surely this is all in jest,” Noushin insisted. “Such talk.”

“Let my Mehrdad go soldiering and just you be my witness before God!” Badria replied. “Now, do you want some company for tea today, or would you prefer we left you alone instead?”

“Tea at my place,” Noushin offered.

“Certainly,” Badria replied, tugging at her daughter one more time to get her to walk a little more quickly.

Cyrus kicked at the stones in front of him as they walked, trying to scuff the new shoes his father had given him early for his birthday instead of a trip to *Takht-e-Suleimân*. When the company arrived at the Drake house, he asked his mother for permission to go to the shore. She refused him leave, however, explaining that Uncle Suleiman had told her only days before about the Alizadeh’s boy’s having fallen down the cliffs and into the water. Little Ali was still not walking and not quite right in the head. She did not want that to happen to *her* only child.

Because of Ali’s accident, Cyrus had to sit with the elders over tea and listen to their adult tales. Jaleh in Teheran was heavy with child, Mehrdad was home with a terrible case of the runs and a fever, and Badria’s otherwise notably extremely healthy uncle Nematollah had only recently died of pneumonia.

⁶³ *Ákhil dar Trovâ* (“Achilles at Troy”).

Cyrus had nothing of interest to offer the adults except a story about a dead seabird he had found rotting on the shore a few days earlier, so he held his tongue. When everyone finished tea, Suleiman Hajj came to visit from town. This gave Cyrus a chance to get out into the fresh air, for he and Suleiman would usually go out into the fields and wrestle or race in the sunshine. It was not long after his arrival that they were out in the grass with their shoes off, pulling each other down and turning in the mud. When they'd had enough for one day, they returned to Cyrus' house.

"Good God above, Suleiman Hajj!" Noushin Drake chided the man. "I expect to see Cyrus all in a mess when he comes home, but you, a grown *man*? Cyrus, fetch some wood and start a fire so Uncle Sully can take a proper bath."

"No, no, Noushin," Suleiman insisted. "I am fine like this."

"Well, if you *must* know why I *insist*," she went on, "it's because I wanted to invite you to stay for dinner, but not in *this* condition. You can't join us *respectable* folk until you bathe."

Cyrus ran to get wood, happy to have Suleiman over for dinner. Suleiman didn't smoke a pipe, and almost never read a newspaper. Once the bathwater cooled to a heat Suleiman could tolerate, Noushin turned her head and let the man undress to get into the big wooden tub. The water was soapy enough that Suleiman could ask her to turn her head without embarrassment.

"You certainly do take good care of yourself, Suleiman," Noushin said. "Ansel never was as fit as you are now, even in his best days."

"It's all the rough play with Cyrus," he explained. "Makes me feel like a young Bezoar again, surveying those mountain passes with Ansel."⁶⁴

"I'll start dinner now," she said before leaving the two in the room on their own.

"Your mother is a very good cook," Suleiman said to Cyrus. "If I were your father, I'd *never* have gone off to Korea."

⁶⁴ The Bezoar Ibex is a sure-footed species of wild goat local to the Alborz, Caucas, and Zagros Mountains, renowned for its curved horns, which are not only a distinctive feature but also a symbol of strength and agility in its natural habitat.

Cyrus agreed that his mother's cooking was the best in all of Mazandaran Province, and he took his leave to help with dinner. Soon, they were all at the small table and ready to eat, and Cyrus stopped Suleiman from taking his first bite, reminding him that it was the custom in the Drake household to give thanks.

"It is not my place, young man. This is *your* house."

Cyrus refused. "You're the eldest man," he said.

Suleiman gave a prayer of thanks that reminded Cyrus and his mother why he was known as the poet-fisherman of Tarsdejh:

Whether from the crashing fish-laden sea,
Or from the lamb fattened in the abundant fields,
Let this food nourish not just our bodies,
But the time we share in tonight's company.

"Well said!" Noushin exclaimed.

After everyone had finished, Cyrus again asked his mother for permission to go to the shore, but she again refused. Hurt that no one trusted him to be careful, he went to his room, closed the door behind him, and searched his shelves for something to read. He found a copy of the new Welsh poet's work that Suleiman had given him on his return after the War, having stayed two extra years after VE Day to assist in the rebuilding, and set about to read Dylan Thomas' lines. Cyrus returned the book to the shelf and chose instead the copy of Hedayat's *Blind Owl* that Suleiman had brought after a trip to Teheran. He found the author's winding narrative difficult to follow and gave up on it, as well.

He could hear his mother and Suleiman talking until late before Suleiman said good night and went back into town. For several days, Suleiman returned and had stew with the family, and always he would leave well into the evening. One night, however, Cyrus did not hear him leave, and this sparked his curiosity more than his willpower could resist.

He waited until after the light under the door to his room had disappeared, then walked out as quietly as a prowling cat from his bed to the door. No one had oiled it for months, so he had to open it so slowly that almost fifteen minutes passed before he could squeeze into the dining room.

His parents' room was directly across from his. Since the door was closed, he had only a keyhole to spy through. He tiptoed across the room and crouched to the knob to investigate. From where he was, he could only see the brassy glint of a bedpost. He knew that if he was going to see anything, he would either have to risk opening the door a crack or go outside to look through the window. The bedroom window had no curtain since it looked out into the woodshed that his father had added to the house a few years before. The woodshed connected directly to the bedroom in this way so they could bring in the Caspian locust firewood during the colder months without having to go outside for it. Since no one could look into the window, his mother had taken down the curtains to use them for the front window.

Cyrus decided to go outside to the attached shed. Once there, he opened the shed door with his key, crept into the shadows, and closed the door behind him. A pile of freshly cut wood lay in front of the window, forcing Cyrus to climb before finding a good angle to spy from. Once he was in place, he peered through a crack in the pile no wider than his thumb. Since the window was on the wall opposite the bed, however, he did not need a better vantage point than the one he'd found.

Cyrus hastily decided that this was surely not the place to do anything about what he saw, and he ran in shame to the shore of the Caspian and watched the reflection of the moon on the cold waters, but the sea of his ancestors no longer scared him. He listened to the call of the waves pounding against the sand and *hated* the sea.



Cyrus looked across the table at his guest before asking permission to leave the table and go outside.

"Cyrus, you haven't eaten half what I put out for you," his mother sharply replied. "Why don't you stay at least long enough to finish your meal?"

"But I..."

"Your mother is a very good cook," Suleiman reminded the boy. "You should eat what she makes for you."

Cyrus wanted to scream at Suleiman, to tell him that he had no right to his mother, but he kept his silence even in the face of this affront. He finished what was on his plate without another word. When he had eaten everything, he reminded his mother that he had to chop firewood for the shed and went outside with the axe. After chopping half the wood, he carried a pile into the shed, and once inside the shed, waited for it to begin again. Four witnesses he could not call upon, but he could now call upon his two eyes, *twice*.

The law of his heart having been satisfied, his judgment was now sealed. Cyrus left the shed and resumed his chores. Perhaps he would be brave enough to confront Suleiman soon, he told himself, or perhaps not soon, but he knew that it must eventually come. When Suleiman came out of the house, smiling at Cyrus, he seemed with his smile to say that he was sorry, for his smile was the weak image of a smile.

“Tell me, little onion,” he said, “what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Before answering, Cyrus raised his axe high and split a block with one blow. “I want to be a man,” he said. “A *man* acts as a man *should* act.”

“You sound like your father,” Suleiman said. “You’re a fine young man.”

“Two eyes—*twice*,” he said coldly. The wooden axe handle felt righteous in Cyrus’ grip. “You have *one* thing on your side right now,” he whispered. “One thing.”

“Pardon me? Run that by me again?”

Cyrus deftly split another block. “You know exactly what I’m talking about. Two eyes, *twice*, wide open to what you’ve done. We aren’t playing a guessing game with a blindfold.”

Suleiman fell silent, like a preacher without a sermon or a raven with its tongue *completely* out. Finally, he replied in his clearest English, “What are we going to do, then, young *man*.”

“You’re *bigger* and heavier than I am, or I would split your skull like wood. That’s the *one* thing you have going for you.”

“Fortunately for me, for the time being,” Hajj replied in all seriousness, shifting his weight about on his feet.

“So, what *should* I do now, Sully? If not *kill* you—because you’re too big—what *should* I do, to be a man?”

“The axe is in *your* hand, Cyrus,” Suleiman returned calmly.
“I am the intruder.”

“Let’s race to the sea,” Cyrus suggested.

“And...?”

“And... if *you* win, I’ll *never* tell a soul. If I win...”

After silently staring into one another’s eyes for what could have been five minutes, a spark of agreement to the terms of this race flashed at once in two sets of eyes, all at once, and as the pact was set in the unspeakable honor of such intense oaths, the two soon disappeared in a mad dash for the sea.



When the boy returned to his house that night, he returned alone. He entered the house, walked into his parents’ room, and woke his mother.

“Yes, Cyrus?” she asked, still mostly asleep. “What is it?”

“He won’t be back,” the son announced.

“You somehow made Sully leave?”

“I’m just a boy, mother. How could I *make* him leave?”

“Dear God, my *child*. What did you *do*?”

“I beat him fair and square in a race, that’s all. His leg failed him, just like Father said it would,” Cyrus explained. “Just like Achilles at Troy. Fair and square, exactly the way Homer wrote the funeral games after Hector killed Patroclus. *Sully* knew about his bugged leg. Just as Achilles and Thetis and Apollo knew.”

Tarsdejh, Iran, March 1995

Cyrus Drake could see that his account of the events had taken its toll: Suleiman Hajj was slowly shaking his head with his eyes closed, counting prayer beads. Finally, he had told of his own anguish to the *only* person alive on all the Earth who would *fully* understand what he had seen and felt.

“For many years, I have been certain that my mother—your lover—killed herself because of the grief of your leaving her. I *made* you leave, Suleiman.” Those words had never left his lips before; he had often wondered if he could *ever* say them aloud. His admission did not lift weight from his scalding breast.

Suleiman reached across the table and touched Drake’s hand very tenderly. Drake could tell that there was no strength left in them. He looked once to either side of himself, let Drake’s hand go, and tipped over his cup of tea to take another sip. After many minutes of silence, he spoke in a crackling, tired voice.

“I have listened to you,” Suleiman said. “I have heard you. I know more than you do on this matter, however. There is *more* than you know.”

Drake had not expected that at all. His heart was racing and he almost spilled what was left of his tea on himself. When he had gathered his senses again, he asked to hear more.

“I know the *truth*,” Suleiman said.

“This matter is serious enough for me to have come all the way to Iran after all these years. It was not an easy journey to arrange, given the politics of the world. Please, quit teasing me.”

“I would not *tease* you,” the old man returned. “I certainly would not *tease*.”

“What *do* you know, then?”

“There are things that I cannot say *here*,” Suleiman said as he stood to leave. “This is the wrong place for any such thing.”

“I beg you,” Drake whispered. He had never begged anyone for anything in his life, and now he begged a weak, old man for answers to his pain, for *only* Suleiman Hajj held those.

“My heart beats *very* sour. I must leave now,” he replied as he limped to the door of the teahouse. “God protect, little onion.”

Drake pounded his fist on the table so loudly that the keeper came dashing over to him to refill his cup of tea. He drank down the steaming cup quickly, without sugar, and got up to leave. To avoid the polite *ta'arof* dance of your-money-is-no-good-here that always ended with actual funds changing hands despite the myriad formal protestations, he left enough *riâl* for the tea, food, and table and rushed out of the place before its memories overwhelmed him more.

The next two days passed with the calmness that comes with uncertainty. Mr. Karimi had taken to playing his reed flute since New Year's Day, and often, when he was home from teaching, he sat in the salon of the house and played for no one but himself. Once or twice, Drake sat beside him and recited the fragments of Khayyam he could remember. Mrs. Karimi showed Salomeh how to cook rice properly per the custom to achieve the best *tah-dig* on the bottom of the pot, and Salomeh respectfully listened to the woman as a daughter would have. At night, Drake held Salomeh as closely as he could to him, but they had not said very much of anything serious to one another since his meeting with Suleiman, and this tranquility gave them mutual bliss.

It finally came time to leave for Teheran and return to New York. Drake and Salomeh were outside loading the back of Mr. Afghani's car with their things when the phone rang. Mrs. Karimi went inside to the kitchen to answer it, and a few minutes later, came to the front door of the house with her hands waving.

“The phone is for you, Mr. Drake,” she said.

Drake knew who was on the phone without having to be told. With his heart pounding almost through his mouth, he marched into the house and picked up the receiver. “*Salâm*, Hajj,” he said before anything else.

“*Salâm*, little onion. Do you have time to meet me? At the rock? You know the rock I'm talking about?”

Salomeh had entered the house and was standing beside Drake closely enough for him to hear her breathing. Suleiman described the route to a section of shore near the teahouse.

“Meet you there, then,” Drake said, before hanging up.

“Who are you going to meet now?” Salomeh asked. She was still wearing her veil from having been outside, and as she talked, it blew over her face.

“Hajj,” he replied. “I should go *now*. Keep up the work so that everything’s ready to go by the time I get back. We wouldn’t want to keep Afghani waiting. We have quite a good buffer on our arrival time in Teheran, so this won’t cut into our itinerary.”

“I love you,” she said as she kissed him.

“I love you, too,” he said as he left by the back door of the house. He went out that way so he would not have to explain to Mr. Afghani where he was going so close to their departure time. The door was still open, and he turned around to look at Salomeh, who was still standing five feet from the phone, looking content, but at the same time concerned for him.

“I hope you find what you need to find,” she said.

“Even if I don’t,” he said, “I’ve found enough in *you*—in *us*—to survive it all, happily ever after. At this stage, because of you, what Suleiman Hajj has to tell me is about peace of mind, not survival of my soul and heart. That is already assured in you.”

From the gaze of her eyes, these words from Cyrus seemed to touch her, and she approached and kissed him quickly five times in succession about his face and then squarely on his lips. “*Jân-e-jânân-am!*”⁶⁵

“*Jânân-am,*” he replied, fully returning her kiss.

From this point on, he walked briskly, without looking back at the Karimi house. It amazed him how quickly he walked, since his legs were still as heavy as before and the wind was blowing strongly against him as he proceeded northward to the beach. With his eyes focused intently and his purpose and destination clear in his mind, the time passed quickly, and he was soon at the teahouse.

⁶⁵ *Jân-e-jânân-am!* (lit. “soul of my souls”) An intensely deep, almost spiritual, devoted term of endearment, much as saying “My very *dearest* heart and soul” might be said and received by English speaking adults in love.

From there, he headed for the stone-seat on the shore after which his mother had named him. The route he walked now was not unlike the steps he had made toward a noisy crowd of fishermen gathered around something curious so many years before, so that he wondered to himself if he wasn't again a boy intruding upon a past that had not been reopened in all this passage of generations.

It had been over forty years since Cyrus Drake had stood at this particular spot on the shore of the Caspian Sea, but even years of trying to bury images of this place had not succeeded. He remembered the distinct smell of the saltwater lake and the Persian honeylocusts in bloom, the sound of the waves pushing up against the rocks, and the color of the place where the sky met the water. This was the *real* sea that he faced, not a dreamer's recollection of it, not a horrible memory of it, nor forgery, nor reproduction. It was the *real* sea of ancestors, and it made him as heavy as an anchor stone tied in a net, ready to be thrown over.

This was the place where he had seen the body washed up and the crowd around it. This was the place where he had stood as a boy and watched the townspeople identify the woman who had been washed ashore as seabirds circled and waited for the people to leave so they could come down and continue to pick at the corpse. He was now taller, heavier, and hardier inside and out than he had been back then, but the sound of the seabirds' calls and the distinctly Hyrcanian aroma seemed exactly the same as so long ago. But Time *had* passed its Sickle more than once.

The time of Shahanshah Pahlavi's despotism, the bloodshed of the Revolution, the long war with Iraq, and the turmoil of the nation that stood between him and his youth in Mazandaran had changed the greater face of Iran but had not changed something as real and consequential to his entire life from the age of ten as this forty-yard slice of the stark Caspian coast. Only his time in Vietnam came anywhere even *close* to putting so much pain and desolation into such a short, measured stretch of time and space.

"Do you remember this *exact* spot at all, little onion?"

Cyrus Drake waited until Suleiman Hajj was closer before saying, “The way a child remembers a mother’s laugh, the slant of her brow, and the warmth of her cheek against his as she kisses him goodnight. I *choose* to remember it in *those* ways.”

“But *what* do you remember of this *exact* place?” Suleiman asked when he was face-to-face with Drake. The bent lines of his visage seemed deeper to Drake than they had last time they’d met, at the teahouse, as if the walk to this place had aged the man. Suleiman sat on a large rock that had somehow migrated from the ruins of Cyrus the Great’s Citadel of Dread to the shore and which millennia had worn into the vague shape of a throne—a rock that had been at the very spot these past forty years. It had been called *Takht-e-Kurosh*⁶⁶ in jest by all the fishermen and children of the village. This was the rock after which his mother had drawn Cyrus’ name from the deep wells of Persian antiquity. This place was the carefully stitched binding of the tome that was his entire life’s story and where that came unraveled at the same time, his heaven *until* this place and his hell *after* this place..

“This is where the fishermen found my mother’s body,” Drake replied. “You know that. You know I would *not* forget *that*. You know that’s why I’m *here*: to face *this* place and my deeds that made this forevermore a *cursèd* site.”

Suleiman bent his creaky back and reached deeply into the sand in front of the stone. “Come here,” he said. “Humor an old man and come over here.”

As Drake approached, the handful of sand in Suleiman’s timeworn, twisted fingers began falling in sheets to the ground.

“You see that?”

“Sand.”

“What’s it doing?”

“Falling.” Drake tried to light a cigarette, but the wind from all directions was too strong for him to be able to keep a flame on his lighter long enough. “Getting between your fingernails.”

“First it gets my hand *dirty*, and then it falls back to the earth I *pulled* it from,” Suleiman said, almost whispering. His eyes were glassy and clouded by more than his years. “Do you know what that’s *like*?”

⁶⁶ *Takht-e-Kurosh* (“Cyrus’ Throne”).

“It’s a bit too poetic for the likes of me,” Drake admitted. “I was once a painter, but never a poet of *your* order.”

“It’s like our *blood guilt*.” Hajj brushed the sand from his hands and turned the wrinkled, leathery fisherman’s palm to Drake as if to show him it was still dirty.

“Guilt. I know guilt,” Drake said. He showed Suleiman the yellow nicotine stains on his fingers. “I earned these stains in an attempt to burn away my blood guilt with cigarette magic,” he observed, never once before to *anyone* having acknowledged the cause of his ceaseless dance of death with cigarettes.

“Yes, I understand,” the fisherman-poet replied.

“First we *pull* it from the earth, then it makes us *dirty*, and then it *falls back* to the earth.”

“And we *remain* dirty,” Drake finished for the old man.

“Yes, I myself have a very *deep* guilt, but not over what you might *think*.” His chest was heaving, as if it were painful for him to breathe the sea air.

Drake squatted so that he could look directly into Suleiman’s eyes and asked, “What are you guilty of, then?”

“You know *some* of the story. You know what I mean when I say I pulled up the earth,” Suleiman began.

“Yes. Your love affair with my mother. Your betrayal of my father’s love and trust as a friend,” Drake said. The seabirds were screaming so loudly he could barely hear his own voice above their cacophony, and his bones ached with a new heaviness every moment they screamed.

“Your mother was a *wonderful* woman, Cyrus. *Astounding*. I cannot, in all honesty, say I wouldn’t do exactly what I did with her all over again. There is just *no telling* in matters of the heart. But, that said, you know what I mean when I say it fell back to the ground,” Suleiman Hajj continued.

“When I beat you in the footrace and you agreed to leave. Everything fell to the ground there and then.”

“Now... do you know exactly why I *remain* dirty to this very moment, even here as we stand?” the poet insisted.

“Not from this?” Drake wanted to offer his hand to comfort the old man, for he could see that Suleiman was in deep pain, but he decided he would not reach out to him, to keep his own anguish in check. His hand felt too heavy to lift, anyway.

“I will tell you what I know of Noushin’s death,” Suleiman finally said.

As he began to relate his side of an ancient story, he told of how, over four decades earlier, he had been sitting on the very same stone, singing an internal lamentation over losing the race. He told of how he had decided to finish his most famous poem, “The Ancestral Sea,” at that place before leaving town.

As he sat on the stone, going over the verse in his head, he heard noise from further down the shore. He concealed himself on the side of the stone that faced away from the noise and knew he was hearing Noushin Drake as she was being dragged down to the sea by her father and two brothers.

“Adulteress!” one of her brothers yelled.

Noushin cried in reply. “Have *mercy* on me!”

Suleiman Hajj stayed hidden behind the stone, frozen with guilt, shame, and fear for his own life. His heart pounded almost through his own chest for his lover, but he could not force his limbs to move.

“Be sure of it!” her father yelled.

With every thrust into the water, the screaming grew less, and the time between the crying and the splashing grew longer. Finally, there was silence but for the sound of bare feet running down the shore. Suleiman still could not move, even when he heard a boat being dragged closer.

The sounds of oars and loud cursing followed. Finally, Suleiman’s limbs came to life again, and he bolted into the night along the shore until there was no more life in his body to carry him. When he came to what remained of his senses, he ran at full speed to his rented small room in Tarsdejh, gathered those of his things he could carry with him, and then fled to Turkey through Tabriz so that he might not also be killed by Noushin’s family.

“I’ve carried this all more painfully than the bullet in my leg, Cyrus. I only returned when I received news that your cursed grandfather and uncles had died of something or another. I was not only a fornicator, but I was also a witness to murder. Those were not simple times, and certainly, they were not good times to be the only witness to the murder of the woman with whom I had fornicated. I would have been killed, too, had I...”

“You needn’t explain,” Drake replied.

Cyrus sat on the ground with his legs crossed, unable to lift his own weight. As he sat there with Hajj, he began to notice that the wind had stopped blowing, the birds had stopped screaming. Even the color of the place where the sky met the sea was dull. A great lightness overtook him, and he felt as he often had as a boy in the teahouse when the smoke had filled his young body just from being too near the old men when they puffed. Suleiman Hajj was now one of those old men, and his words were the stray smoke of enlightenment and contemplation.

It was then, in this shared moment of release of a mutual psychic burden that each of these two men had carried across foreign borders, held back from all others to be examined only at the moments of their greatest introspective courage, that the old fisherman-poet of Tarsdejeh, Suleiman Hajj, clad as a Sufi forever in a lifelong penance, began to recite his most celebrated poem, the words floating from his mouth into the sea air that no longer smelled of the sea and mixing with the froth of the surf that no longer sounded of a pounding heart, in a voice that no longer was old and heavy, drifting clouds of release over all Creation.

Cyrus closed his newfound eyes and saw visions of dancers. She danced for him in his mind, among the clouds, his *Sâqi*, his Salomeh, like a *Baba Tahir*⁶⁷ or Hafez-inspired mystic dancer, with the motions of a charmer, and Hyrcanian sea salt melted into poppy fumes, and he floated a while with the old man on his namesake's throne and was content that his heavy mind had been washed away. An axe held in the hand of an ancient, hidden truth had chopped away the ropes and chains, and he was at last and completely more real than flesh bone or blood. The time came that Cyrus Drake could look out again over the sea, and his keen painter's mind would begin applying azure, jade, and ivory to its taut canvas, and the ripples patterned thousands of memories slithering across his translation of a new wilderness. And he joined Hajj in a second round of "The Ancestral Sea," each modulating his voice to his own particular understanding of their now shared account of Noushin's fate and their parts in it.

⁶⁷ *Baba Tahir*, also known as Baba Taher Oryan Hamadani, was an 11th-century Persian dervish poet renowned for his amorous and mystical poetry, whose quatrains continue to be performed to this day.

Midtown Manhattan, July 1996

Cohen Benjamin lit another cigarette while he waited for Cyrus Drake to come pick him up at the airport curb. The flight to New York had been reasonably short but was nonetheless hellish and he wanted sleep. Drake finally arrived in a beat-up blue sedan.

Drake didn't seem to have aged much in the two years since Cohen had last seen him back in San Francisco. He was thinner around the waist and thicker in the arms than he remembered him, as if he'd spent the last two years in the gym preparing for the boxing match of his life. Cohen nodded at him to open the back, and when the trunk popped, threw in his suitcase, and got into the passenger seat.

"Benny," Drake said as Cohen buckled in.

"Nobody's called me *Benny* since... since the last time you called me that," Cohen said. He reached out his arm and shook Drake's hand vigorously. Drake's grip was made of iron, another aspect of him that felt new since last they'd met. "Thanks for getting me on such short notice. I *hate* New York taxis and just panicked as we were landing, you know? You been working out, my man?"

"No problem," Drake replied. "Glad to help out. Where are you staying? And yeah, I've been staying fit. Fighting form."

"They've stowed me away in some roach hotel, I'm sure," he said. He took a small slip of paper from his overcoat pocket and handed it to Drake. "Here's the address. I don't know it from Eden, so let me know if they've given me a raw deal."

"As raw as they get," Drake replied upon seeing the address of the hotel. "Why not crash on my couch? It folds out."

“That would be great,” Cohen answered quickly. “You’re near the Museum of Modern Art, aren’t you? Maybe I can take that in tomorrow morning before heading over to see my editor at Grant. That or The Met.”

“Yes,” Drake replied. “Salomeh would love to finally meet you,” he added. “She has a whole ton of questions about *Passing Through*.”

Cohen took a cigarette out of his nearly empty pack. “Mind if I smoke?”

“No problem,” Drake said. With one hand, he found his own pack and started one for himself.

“How’s the painting been?” Cohen asked once his cigarette was a quarter done. Since the car was starting to fill with smoke, he opened his window.

“I’ve started up again,” Drake said. “It was a too long stretch without anything, but that’s over. I’m really picking up speed, *especially* lately.”

“It’s good to hear you got over your dry spell,” Cohen said. “And let me say, again, you’re looking pretty ripped.”

“It’s totally the gym time,” Drake explained. “That and laps in the pool. Two solid years of it, daily. How about your writing? *Passing Through* is great and all, but I need another novel for my students soon.” Drake winked as he drove.

“*Barflies by the Hundreds* is due out *very* soon,” Cohen said.

“The draft you sent me was something. Sounds like the old Syncopated Cup crowd to me,” Drake laughed. “In particular, Walter Aarons jumped off the page to me as being Abe Wately.”

“I *did* base a few characters on that messy crew, yes,” Cohen admitted. “But it’s hardly a *roman à clef*, so don’t get your hopes up on catching *too much* of the *latest* gossip in the *final* cut. The lawyers at Grant advised me to soften the glare in a *few* places.”

They continued to catch up and make small talk as Drake drove toward the Plaza District. Eventually, they pulled into the covered parking lot that served Drake’s building, and they were soon on their way to his suite.

“She’ll be asleep by now, so try to be as light as a cat if you can,” Drake said, checking his wristwatch. When they arrived at his floor, he carried Cohen’s bag for him, opened the door, and waved his friend in.

As soon as Cohen stepped into the apartment, he could smell oil paint. It had a beautiful smell. Drake carried his bag into the living room, put it beside the couch, and then disappeared into another room. Cohen sat on the couch. On the wall across from him was a large vertical canvas. He could tell by the signature that it was not a Drake. He stood to get a better look at it.

“That’s Rube for you,” Drake said, “always raising a few eyebrows.” He was standing in the hall with a blanket thrown over one shoulder and a pillow under his arm.

“Rube?”

“Old friend of mine,” Drake explained. “Just had his first *big* showing. I couldn’t help but buy that one.” He threw the pillow onto the couch and the blanket over the top of it. “Rube’s starting to catch on. His and my agent have a co-agenting agreement.”

“He’s got a touch of *Klimt* happening,” Cohen noticed out loud. “Look at the expression—there’s a haunting ambiguity there, almost as if the subject’s soul is peeking through canvas.”

Drake put his hand on his chin, stared, and said, “Now that you mention it, there is some of that. No one has brought that up before about Rube’s stuff, but it’s as clear as day once you hear it said.” Drake then patted Cohen on the shoulder and said, “Make yourself at home. I’ll be gone to work by the time you get up. Feel free to make yourself breakfast. What’s mine is yours.”

“I appreciate it,” Cohen said as his friend walked into the hall and disappeared behind a bedroom door.

Cohen pulled open the couch, spread the blanket down, fluffed his pillow, and then realized that he was not yet ready to sleep. He went to the fridge, found some vodka and ice, and poured himself a drink. It felt good to have some freezing-cold vodka in him.

After a few sips, he walked to the terrace door, quietly slid it open, and outside. The fresh air took some of the strain of travel from his face. He loosened his collar, sat on the outdoor chair, and closed his eyes, his half-empty tumbler still in his hand. Once in a while, he sipped his drink, without opening his eyes. He eventually opened them and stared at the clear night sky. Finally ready to sleep, he returned inside, undressed, put on his robe, and crawled under the covers after another tumbler of two fingers of vodka. He was soon fast asleep.

Bacon and eggs. It was hard to not wake up hungry with that smell in the air. Before he could open his eyes, Cohen heard a woman's voice ask, "How do you like your eggs?"

He opened his mouth and said, with a dry tongue, past dry lips, "Over easy, thanks." He then coughed.

"I wasn't sure if you would eat bacon," the voice replied, "but I made some anyway."

"Bacon is fine, thank you," Cohen replied, slowly opening his eyes to the glare of morning. The room stung into his brain. He could feel the painful surface of his skull as he turned his head to look at who he assumed was Salomeh. She was standing near the stove in the kitchen. "Cyrus has gone to work, then?" he managed to say past his headache. "I'm sorry I'm in a pile here, but I had a personal relationship with too much to drink last night. Good morning."

"Yes, you certainly slept in," she said, glancing over at him. "And good morning. Cyrus left some time ago."

She was beautiful. Everything Drake had ever said about her had been spot on. If she hadn't been his friend's partner, he would have allowed himself to stare longer, but instead, he closed his eyes again and took in a deep breath of bacon and egg air. He followed this with a yawn and a good arm stretch.

"How was the flight?" she asked.

"The man beside me kept going on about his failed business deals. One boring failure after the next." His tongue was still dry. He pulled on his clothing under his blanket, quickly folded the couch, and sat on the couch and closed his eyes to shut out the glare. "May I ask the time?"

"Nine-fifteen," Salomeh replied.

He opened his eyes, looked at her, and smiled. "You're a lifesaver. I want to visit the MoMA this morning," he told her. "Or The Met. I need art in my veins. Could you point me in the right direction?"

"MoMA. It opens at ten-thirty," she said as she put eggs onto a plate. "Would you like me to join you? I get in free, since Cyrus and I have memberships, at least *there*. No fancy Met passes for us. You would get in with me for free since our memberships are Patron." She walked back into the living room, presenting him with a plate of breakfast and a fork. "This may help your head."

“Oh, thank you, Salomeh.” He stood and went to the table with his plate. He wasn’t sure how he should answer her about going to the MoMA with him. “That would be splendid,” he finally replied. “So, Cyrus said you’d have some questions about my novel.”

She walked to other side of the table, turned around the chair with the back towards him and her arms crossed over the back, straddling it. “Yes,” she said.

“For instance?” he said before breaking a strip of bacon in two and putting it in his mouth.

“For instance, why doesn’t the hero have a name at all?” she asked. She rested her chin on the top of the back of the chair, her brown eyes wide open.

“Hero?” Cohen said. “Is he a *hero*?”

“That’s another question I have,” she admitted. “But it can wait. I have a few. Let’s stick to the matter of his name. Why do we never learn his name, so we can more fully humanize him?”

Cohen pointed his fork at the painting across from the couch. “Does the *humanized* man in that piece have a name?” he asked.

She turned her head towards Rube’s painting. “Not that I know about. Rube didn’t say, and it wasn’t on the provenance.”

“Exactly,” he said. “You may *give* him a name, I may give him one, but the *painter* didn’t do so, and therefore, we can only *guess*. Does the fact that the subject in Rube’s painting has no discernable name change *anything*? Yes: it *universalizes* him.”

“You are right. Your *protagonist*—let’s call him that until we discuss later if he is a *hero*—is the *reader*, and by not giving him a name, you let the reader decide who he is, thus making him human by internalization. That’s how I understand you.”

Cohen nodded vigorously. “*Exactly*. That *is* most definitely why the protagonist of *Passing Through* has no name,” he said. “Thank you for breakfast, by the way. It was delicious.” He took the plate to the kitchen sink, washed it, and put it on the drying rack with the silverware. “So, I don’t feel,” he then went on to explain, “that it is the artist’s place to supply the *entire* picture.” He lifted the half-empty tumbler from the small table beside the couch, left there from the night before, and finally finished his drink. “Painters don’t do it, so why should authors?”

“You sound like Cyrus on these things,” she noted.

“He and I used to spend many an evening in conversation on these and similar matters, and our views are similar. We’re *both* poststructuralists, after all. Even if I did want to paint the entire picture, with loads of adjectives for every noun and adverbs for every verb, I could never paint the thing *entirely*: it will *always* be subject to reader interpretation of what I have created. I might say, ‘Jane was intelligent’—all the words I needed to say what I came to say as the author—and in some reader’s mind will be the word ‘very.’ As in ‘Jane was *very* intelligent.’ Or some less kind reader might inject a ‘not’ into the same sentence and turn my intention to something I had no desire whatever to convey. And it only takes a single one of these mental reader adjustments to make trying to say the *Whole Thing* one grandiose Fool’s Errand. That’s what I have to tell the Intentionalists.”

“Indeed, you two certainly share some of *core* perspectives on these subjects, it seems. How *exactly* did you meet? I only know that it happened while you were an editor,” Salomeh asked.

“He was already at Doole House Editions since before I was hired, getting full use out of his university education in literature while he perfected his craft and practiced his branding on the lay low. But whatever he was in the painting scene at that time, at the press he was *the* Head of Literary Fiction Acquisitions.

“When his painting career finally took off and he could support himself on only that, he handed in his resignation, and I got shuffled into his former position and was *completely* outside my weight class.” Cohen hadn’t thought about the exact details of that moment in his life and career for quite a few years.

He continued, “But he saw something, I guess, so he taught me the ropes of his position for three months before he hit the road, which was two-and-a-half months more than he’d planned to hang on, and that’s how we got to know one another. The rest, as they say, is gossip and folklore told around fireplaces at Don Chang’s Syncopated Cup in the Marina District.”

“It’s *fascinating* how lives get so utterly intertwined while we’re busy doing other things, isn’t it? Let’s go!” she called out.

At the Museum of Modern Art, standing fast before Klimt's *Hope II*, Cohen came to realize his healthy desire for Salomeh, but he pushed what he could to the back of his mind and gave the painting its due admiration.

"About heroes," she said.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "Heroes, in my opinion, are simply villains who have made better decisions in the eyes and opinions of those looking in."

"So, at the end of *Passing Through?* Is the nameless man a hero or a villain?" she asked.

"Again, that's for the reader to say. It really does depend on who is doing the reading," he said. "For example, tell me what *Hope II* means."

"It's both a disturbing and soothing piece," she said after a moment of silence. "It's very difficult to say definitely what it *means* without knowing what Klimt *intended* it to."

Cohen stepped back a few paces. "To some degree, sure, but then, no matter what the *intent*, it also means exactly what *you* want it to. If you find that skull behind her belly disturbing, then it means something entirely different than if you do not. Klimt has absolutely no power over how you are going to react to that."

"Who wouldn't find it disturbing?"

"Just look at the expression on her face," Cohen said. "She seems to be well at peace. The others, down below, seem rather at peace, also, don't they? Or perhaps they are all deceased? But would it then be called *Hope II*? The colors are not disturbing. Were it not for that skull.... Have you ever seen *Hope I*?"

"Yes, prints and photographs, anyway," Salomeh replied.

“Given the similar themes and the same half-skull, I would say that Gustav Klimt meant *something*, surely, but that whether he intended for you to be disturbed or soothed is entirely up for debate.” The talk of art was not serving its purpose; he could not push back his thoughts about Salomeh. “Let’s please return to the apartment. I have a few papers there I have to bring to Grant. I have a two o’clock appointment with them.”

In the taxi on the way back to the apartment, Cohen tried to think of the matters he would be discussing with his editor at Grant Editions. His cell phone rang. It was Cyrus.

“Sorry to be calling you on your cell,” Drake said.

“It’s fine,” Cohen returned. “I’ll be billing Grant for all calls while in New York anyway. What’s up?”

“I’ll be at the college until about eleven tonight,” Drake said. “I’ve started a canvas in my studio, and just don’t want to lose the flow I’ve found. Could I trouble you to take Salomeh out to dinner tonight if you don’t have anything on your agenda? It would take the heat off me.”

Cohen didn’t know what to say. He glanced over at Salomeh, beside him in the back, and then said, “Sure, Cyrus, no problem. I’ll bill Grant for that, too.”

Drake hung up at his end.

“Cyrus wishes me to convey that he regrets that he won’t be home until about eleven tonight,” Cohen explained.

“Painting at the college again?” she asked, disappointment clear in the movement of her mouth and line of her brow.

“Does he do that often?” he asked as he put the phone back in its clip. “And all that gym and pool? He’s on *fire*.”

“More and more lately,” she sighed. “I know he *is* painting. I’ve seen some of his new work. It’s definitely his best, most expressive creative output. But still, that doesn’t make....” She stopped herself, placing a finger over her lips.

“He also asked me to treat you to dinner out,” Cohen finally admitted.

Hearing this, Salomeh smiled widely. “Then the night won’t be a total waste,” she said. “I’ll give you the spare key, you let yourself in when you get back, so I can be out and about as I must, and then we’ll figure something out about dinner. How does that sound, Cohen?” When he nodded, she added, “Great!”

After arriving back at the apartment, Cohen organized the papers he would need for his meeting with his editor. Salomeh gave him a spare key and he headed for the appointment. During the entire meeting, he could not focus in his thoughts on the matters that needed to be considered. Jane Plath presented him with ideas and options, and he simply picked the ones that seemed least offensive to him, rather than really thinking much about what was being asked of him. It was unheard of to be flown in to be consulted on such issues at the publisher's expense anyway, and so, he assumed Grant would eventually do whatever pleased the marketing people most. *Passing Through's* sales had done so well, however, that *Barflies by the Hundreds* would be given special treatment. It was simply that, with Salomeh on his mind, the special treatment from his publisher didn't matter. Finally, the meeting was over. He shook Jane Plath's hand, thanked her very much for everything, and assured her that he would only be in New York on their tab until Monday. She insisted he enjoy the best New York had to offer, on the Grant tab, smiled, and had her assistant see him to the front door.

Once outside, he hailed a cab and returned to the apartment. It was four-thirty by the time he arrived back. As soon as he opened the door, he could smell something delicious.

"Hello, Cohen!" Salomeh called out to him from the kitchen. "I decided to make dinner, rather than have us go out."

After removing his shoes and hanging up his overcoat, Cohen entered the kitchen. "That was very thoughtful of you," he said. "After a day on my feet, I much prefer this! Thanks so much!" He noticed that the kitchen table had been set with two settings. There were flowers in the middle, and two candles, already burning. It seemed odd for Salomeh to have set so intimate a table, but after his having spent so much time in a cramped office discussing publication details with Plath, the idea of going out for dinner was not very appealing.

"Do I have time for a nightcap and smoke on the balcony?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

He went to the fridge, poured himself some vodka, neat, and wandered outside. It was difficult to light up his cigarette in the wind, but he eventually managed to get a good bead going on it.

Ten minutes and one cigarette later, he was three-quarters of the way through his tumbler. The door slid open, and he turned to see Salomeh, now dressed in a tight-fitting one-piece dress. She had an amazing body, and with the drink in him, he did not turn away after staring for too long.

“Dinner is ready,” she said, smiling and waving him in.

He put back what remained of his drink and walked inside, still staring at her as she walked in front of him to the set table. He sat, stared down at his plate, and tried to find words to say that weren’t silly sounding.

“This is amazing,” he said as he tasted the chicken.

“How *long* have you known Cyrus?” she asked him.

“Quite a few years,” he replied, cutting another bite from the chicken on his plate. “Fifteen years, all told, I think. Yes, fifteen years. Never took time to add it all up before.”

“Has he *always* been so ... aloof? So *distant*?” Across from him, in the candlelight, with yellow light dancing on her olive skin, she was more breathtaking than ever.

“More or less,” he finally replied. “He’s someone I always had difficulty getting a handle on. That’s why I didn’t ever really *attempt* to base any character on him in any of my work. He’s too complex, but in a minimalist way, if that makes any sense at all. Starts like a grocery list, ends like a poem.”

Salomeh’s gaze did not leave his. “I have done my utmost to bring him out of that,” she said. “For a while, after we returned from our trip to Iran, he seemed almost out of his secret place. But then....”

“Actually, before you go on, which I certainly want to hear, I’ll correct what I said. I *did* try to write him, back in my editor days, when I was working on my aspirational first novel. I had a novella with his fictional counterpart, Morgan. Tried to get it published as *Returning*—to no avail. Revised it. Fought tooth and *nail* to get to the essence of what it needed to be to... and all these years later that thing has been in a closed box in a closet, forgotten because I still don’t know how to get a bead on him.” After a sip of water, Cohen said, “Enough from *me*. You go on.”

“Then he started painting again,” she sighed. “It’s his *first* love. He had put it aside for such a long time. I met him when he wasn’t painting.”

“So when Drake fell back in love with his painting, you lost something?” Cohen guessed.

“I lost *him*,” Salomeh said. “That must sound selfish of me, I understand. I do not want to *limit* him in *any* way. I just want to *understand* whom I’m with.”

“Don’t you love dance as much as he loves painting?” He pushed his plate away, finished. “That was a lovely meal, by the way. Thank you very much.”

“My pleasure,” she said. She pushed the flowers aside so that their gazes were now completely meeting. “Dance is dance,” she then said. “Dance is *not* my first love. That would be like loving the grains in the top part of an egg timer, which, as we know, is tipped up *once* and then it just empties and falls away *so* quickly. Dance *is* the body, and the body ages, or shatters, and *always* is forgotten to ash. One must not make the ephemeral one’s *first* love. And thus the shift to choreography, which, while not my first love, can perhaps be my career legacy.”

Cohen considered her analogy, and just when he thought he had a reply that might fit the moment, she said, “Do *you* love your *writing* more than you’d love a *woman*?”

He didn’t know what to say at first, and so, took another sip of water instead. After about a minute of staring at Salomeh’s eyes, he said, “I loved a woman, once, but she was married. Then, I got lost in India while on a trip there, and on my return, it was editorial meetings, and then book signings, without end. Lost in it all, you know, taking whatever I could get of whatever honest—and sometimes probably dishonest—human affection in circumstances like that, without forming many true bonds.”

Salomeh put the dishes in the kitchen and then returned to the table. She placed a chair at the side of the table so that she was closer to Cohen. “But *could* you love a woman more than you love your work?” she asked.

In the candlelight, Salomeh looked good enough for him to say, “Yes,” and his mouth moved the words before he could stop himself with whatever he had left of his better judgment. He realized that he did not *know* her and was speaking only from being intoxicated by her good looks, her exceptionally fit body, and the glassy stare she was giving him, but the word came out and he did not speak to contradict himself.

“What would it take?”

“I *could* love a woman more than anything. That would depend on the woman, and something else.”

“What else?” she asked, not for a moment releasing her inquisitive gaze. “Assuming the right woman.”

“Well, given the right woman, it would then depend on whether I wanted to end up in the epilogue of *my* life’s *magnum opus* put forth as a *hero* or a *villain*.”

Another cigarette butt flew inconsiderately in the New York air, still burning, as Cohen leaned over the railing. He could hear the glass door slide open as he tipped back a mouthful from the bottle directly. Drake walked up beside him, held out his hand for the bottle, took a sip, and then lit up a cigarette and handed it to his friend.

“Such a beautiful city,” Cohen said, his words slurring from his mouth.

“It is, indeed,” Drake replied, lighting another cigarette, this one for himself. “Nothing like this take on Central Park.”

“Saw Klimt at the MoMA today,” Cohen tried to say. “Rube *does* have some Klimt in him, I tell you.”

“*Hope II* is my guess,” Drake said. He put his arm around Cohen the way close male friends sometimes will when sharing an open bottle.

“All in the how-you-see-it,” his friend replied.

“Pardon?”

Cohen tried to form meaningful words through his drunken haze but could not for some time. “You know, hope or despair, hope or despair, which is it going to be? Stared at them both in my mind, hope and despair, and can’t rightly say I can tell one from the other, I’m afraid. Flummoxed.”

Drake smiled at his friend but did not reply with words. Cohen held out his hands, as if holding up the skull of Yorick in *Hamlet* and said, “I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is!”

“You’re drunk, Benny,” Drake laughed. “Bard-level drunk.”

“Actually, both *Hope I* and *Hope II* have poor Yorick’s daft skull lurking in them, so the citation is entirely appropriate and on topic given my day at the MoMA,” Cohen then continued.

“What’s eating you, then, Cohen?” Drake asked.

Cohen gathered up his courage. “Salomeh and I went to bed together after dinner. And all that this entails.” The words were now out, into the cold air, falling carelessly over the edge like spent cigarette butts. He put out his chin. “So, *hit* me,” he said.

Drake tapped the cleft of Cohen Benjamin’s chin with his index. His hands smelled of turpentine. “She already told me,” he said. “So you needn’t share any further details of *that*.”

Upon hearing this from his friend, Cohen pushed his chin into Drake’s finger so that it hurt. “Come on, damn it, hit me *hard*.” His cigarette was now close to the end and almost burning between his fingers, so he tossed it even though he knew he should have used the ashtray. “Judge, jury, and execute me.”

“Why?” Drake asked. He seemed amused with the whole situation. “What would that amend? That path ends *badly*.”

Not knowing what else to say, Cohen leaned over the terrace railing again and took two deep breaths in quick succession. He grabbed the bottle from Drake and took a long gulp from it. “Well, I guess, if you hit me, then I’ll know you’re willing to fight like hell for her, and I won’t do anything stupid.”

Drake put his arm around his friend again and said, “You’ve *already* gone and done something *extremely* stupid, Benny.” He lit another smoke and handed it to Cohen. “And there’s nothing I can do about that, *now*, is there? I can’t double back to undo a line, put some turps here or there on the canvas of life to erase, to bend with the remover to remove. Someone would come along later and would find the correction and admit impediments.”

“You’re smacking me with Sonnet 116? That’s *all*?” Cohen took the fresh cigarette, put it gently between his lips, saying, “No sabers at dawn? No ‘you dumb piece of shit’?” He shrugged. “A nice whack in the head would make it all clear again, Drake.”

“If you had been *anyone* but you, Benny,” Drake said, taking a deep drag from his smoke, “I’d have decked you. Hell, if you had been Abe Wately or such, I’d have plain *ended* you just as soon as look at you, to be honest. It *was* you, though. Don’t you know what power you have over people?”

"I'm just an author, man. You've known your share of me in your time. And a *bona fide* member of the Rogues' Gallery."

"Lifetime *card-carrying* member, that," Drake agreed. "The thing is, you make us think things we might not have thought if we hadn't known you. And do you want to know why I think that is? I gave this a decent amount of thought before tonight."

"Keep the kind words coming. It'll hurt less when you *do* hit me to punctuate your final point," Cohen then replied, only half-kidding about still expecting to be hit.

"Because in all that fray, you were *not* merely some kind of hedonist, my friend," Drake explained. "You flew to France, you ran off to India, you got lost, you climbed up at the press, you got published. For *love*. All of that for love of something *outside* yourself, even if it was just how much you love seeing someone smile as they read your book over there at the other table. You did all that living so you could leave a mark, perhaps even just a little one, right *here*..." He tapped his heart. "You did it to make *us* think things we might not otherwise have thought and feel feelings we couldn't remember having felt, even if it was as far back as when we were a child of ten, had we not read *you*."

Cohen took a long drag and nodded that he had heard and understood Drake's position. "High praise coming from you."

"I truly *wish* you hadn't done it, Benny, but I'll surely learn to live with this. It's all part of the ebb and flow of real life."

"What am I, charmed?" Cohen smiled at his friend.

"Must be," Drake replied, blowing circles out into the cold New York wind. "But let me tell you something else in case you think I've tickled your ears when I should, in fact, be boxing them. Something I've noticed about you. I think I can tell you?"

"Please do," Cohen said. "I'm due a *mental* wallop at least."

Drake wandered into the apartment and returned a minute later with a piece of paper. "This is my favorite assignment," he said as he handed the paper to Cohen.

On the paper was a quotation. Rainer Maria Rilke.

"What is the assignment you work from this?" Cohen asked.

"You are but a surface player," Drake said. "You touch the surface of life but do not dig *right* into it. Something about your mouth," Drake said, touching his cold turpentine fingers to the corner of his friend's mouth.

Cohen was silent for a long time, and then replied, partially quoting the citation: "...but somewhere there is still a forgotten piece of our disguise clinging to us. A trace of exaggeration remains in our eyebrows, we do not notice that the corners of our mouths are twisted."

"Something isn't quite *right* with you. Something is sticking to you. I can see it in your fiction." He leaned forward.

"You think?"

"When I went to Iran with Salomeh," Drake said, softly, "I discovered something. Something much darker than I even dared remember about the death of my mother."

"Yes?"

"Years ago, my mother had a marital affair. I wanted to *kill* the bastard," he explained. "But I was just a child and couldn't manage that."

Cohen stepped back a pace on the beat of the word *kill* in the evening air, remembering what he and Salomeh had done.

"Don't worry, you dumb-ass bastard," Drake laughed. "I've already forgiven you for what really was my mistake. Hell, I should have known better than to give you a written invitation to treat her to a night out, what with your damned infamous animal magnetism. The Rogues' Gallery poster boy, remember? I'm not talking about *tonight*. I'm not a poet like you are, you charmed Artful Dodger. I try to avoid metaphors and pathetic fallacies. I'm talking now about the *real* world as we walk through it."

Cohen leaned over the solid railing and looked down into the street far below, fully glad to not have been tossed over the side.

"For all those years, I thought my mother had killed herself because I'd made her lover leave town, and it *ate* at me. It was like the corner of *my* mouth was crooked." Drake touched the corner of his own mouth. "I found out, when I went to Iran, that she was murdered. My mother didn't *kill herself*. Her father and brothers *murdered* her. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*, but only just."

"Jesus, man," was all Cohen could muster. "That must have been a load of personal guilt off your mind, though."

Drake didn't speak for a while. "I thought it was, Benny. I really thought it was. I put ribbons and bows on it, at first, before I fully processed it. But that's only a surface read."

Cohen wanted to say something but couldn't just yet.

“For year upon year, that was my reality: that I had betrayed my mother to the point of her despair and suicide.” Drake took a deep drag. “In the end, I cannot *truly* escape responsibility for her death, though, can I, *honestly?*” He stood tall and stretched out his arms. “After all, she wouldn’t have ever *confessed* to her parents had I not triggered the events leading up to that; my part *was* played. It wasn’t until I came to accept *that* part that I was *truly* free to process it more fully. I was part of a toxic, broken system of things that conspired *collectively* against her in a mad flurry of grotesque complicity. But that system was not in place by my own hand, and I needn’t perpetuate or permit it again. I must sit in the discomfort of what accepting my role truly means to my present and has meant across my past relationships.”

Cohen still did not have words for Drake.

“For example, the distance I always put between myself and Valery Rockford even though she and I were an exclusive item for years,” he explained. “That all felt like playboy independence when it was *convenient* to feel that way about it, but it felt like toxic masculinity and stoic rot in a damp, dark corner once I understood how much I’d bought into the lie that even *committed* relationships cannot be fully trusted. It was always best for me to run fast away from the *true* action of a *meaningful* connection. I set the tone with us for years, which was a dick move.”

“The coffee and the kettle are keeping their mouths shut.”

Drake pressed his finger on Cohen’s chest, hard, until it felt he would almost pierce the skin, and said, “Something *deep* and *dark* and *ugly* is in there, Benny. Something that makes you go around, not *quite* being who you are. Something that takes you out of your head ten feet, twelve feet, a mile—whatever it takes to mess with my woman after I’ve been a *friend* to you.

“Getting back to your question,” Drake continued after he took another deep drag, “I honestly cannot figure out if you are *charmed* or *cursed*. Oh, I reckon I *could* easily hit you square into tomorrow, and it wouldn’t do *any* damned good. Instead, I decided to have this little talk with you. I’ll fix things with Salomeh if they can be fixed; that’s on us to figure out. You fix things with yourself, sit in your discomfort, and reflect deeply on *what* that discomfort is *telling* you, or I can guarantee that you will most *certainly* crash.”

Cohen Benjamin put his own arm around Drake's back. At the very depths of where he allowed himself to question what he meant, who he was, he tried to stand back and see a hero or a villain but could only see two drunken idiots standing on a terrace at night, throwing butts into the wind, some blowing left, some right, all very likely annoying the hell out of the rest of all Creation.

"You're a good friend, Cyrus," Cohen finally said. "I truly do appreciate your taking time in bringing some clarity to this."

"You also probably don't fully have your head around my early-bird time in Vietnam. It all pertains to our little talk here." Drake cleared his throat. "I spent all of the first four years of my enlistment in Vietnam," he finally said.

"I just assumed you did the standard time," Cohen admitted.

"I had no love for what I did and saw, I assure you. I'd really like to believe that nobody there had any love for *any* of that."

"Not from what I've ever heard from vets," Cohen agreed.

"I learned firsthand what my father did in ISR, because I got pigeonholed pretty quickly into the same line of service. Having a father who'd served in France and Korea, I had something to prove. But it was something else."

"IS... what? Catch me up on that one."

"ISR," Drake clarified. "Details aren't important. What it all amounts to was our providing local counterinsurgency support. And all that this entails." He stared directly into his friend's eyes. "I had this friend. A crazy but infinitely loveable bastard. Kind of sounds like you, Benny, eh? I was his sergeant, and he was my corporal. His painting is in the other room. Rueben Hurst. The Klimt-like one. He was with me the entire time, and for his own reasons—I suspect some kind of deal gone nasty, he *never* said what and I didn't care to press the matter—he wanted to stay shy of stateside for four years solid. And, of course, you know what they say."

"I don't know what they say; I never did any time in..."

"*No one* gets left behind." He put his arm around Cohen. "I'll drag you kicking and screaming into your right mind, just like I did for Rube, if it fucking kills me. Even when the so-called 'covert' run gets fully illuminated in the light of a trip-flare array, bringing down the Rapture on you."

“Your forgiveness means the world to me.”

“Friendship. Forgiveness. *Semper Fidelis*. Old as *Rome*, that one is, not just the Marines. As old as Achilles and Patroclus. Here’s the thing: it starts well before you hitch whatever wagon you decide to hitch your horses to and doesn’t stop when you land back stateside from wherever that wagon took you.”

Cohen sighed and said, “Does one mule count as *horses*?”

“Heck, even a twelve-year old cat counts. Anyway, how we interpret this idealistic Latin precept is an organic thing, polished and *finely* tempered by a lifetime of experience and relationship failures. We choose whom we consider our true *friends* wisely, because getting friends out of the crosshairs when the array gets tripped can take a *lot* out of you, and there’s only so much of *that* level of engagement one can finagle. Only so much *pull* and *push* left in these old arms.”

“Still waters run deep with you in ways I run away from. I told Salomeh that very thing: I can’t write the depths of you into my fiction. So I am going to ask you: did you tell *her*? About the shift in your understanding of where you fit in all that stuff with your mother?”

“Hadn’t fully processed it until a few minutes before I came out here to plant your chin into next weekend,” Drake replied, faking a slow closed-fist punch across his friend’s chin. “It came into focus quickly and surely the way these things once in a while somehow manage to do.”

Cohen said, “I’m going to call a taxi and head to a hotel.”

“We used to say that calling a taxi at a time like right now shows some very *sharp* situational awareness,” Drake agreed with a hearty laugh. “Now listen, Cohen, I *know* you write what you live. I get that. Dress it all up and turn it into archetypes. And I know how much you *hate* to be told what to do,” he set up for his closing remarks to his friend. “But—on your honor—if you *ever* turn tonight into a template and write it up, please do *not* go writing your part as a *hero*. I expect *better* from you.”

“Villain it is, then....”

“No. *Neither one*. Haven’t you been listening? You’re just a complex human fucking being like everyone here, and by ‘here’ I include Salomeh inside. No binaries here, my friend. No coin flips. And certainly *no* hero’s cape and cowl for you, Cohen.”

Cohen started dialing for a taxi but paused before entering the last number. He brushed himself off and stood up straight. “My honor has been tainted tonight, so I won’t dare swear on it,” he said as a straight matter of fact. He put his hand out after spitting into it and then added, as they clasped palms on his oath, “I swear on the friendship you’ve continued to extend to me after my egregious sin against you: *no hero.*”

As his friend went inside to quickly pack and finish calling a taxi, Cyrus Drake gripped the rail and inhaled deeply and slowly for several minutes. Salomeh stepped onto the balcony with him and stood beside him. The sounds of the city reminded him of the ocean. It was a peaceful rather than hostile silence between them. She and he had already talked earlier, and he felt that *most* of what needed to be said between them earlier on *had* been said.

But he had more yet he felt needed saying.

“I owe you an apology and never expect one from you,” he began after five more minutes of their shared silence. “Earlier tonight you said you think I love my work more than I love you,” he began. “I *have* neglected our relationship for some time now. I admit that. I became consumed by my art and work, to your detriment. I am sorry that I neglected and hurt you, and I now *commit* to being mindful of *your* needs and to our relationship.”

Salomeh placed her soft hand on the back of Drake’s tense neck and rubbed away what must have been visible agitation in the muscles there. “Thank you for admitting your part.”

“I can talk the noble and pious talk with Cohen and say, ‘No one gets left behind,’ but I did that very thing to you, my love, for which I am *truly* contrite. I’ve been lost in my thoughts as I paint with the new fury I’ve found lately,” he continued before he lit up and leaned on the metal rail. “Thoughts about Tarsdejh.”

“You were doing so well after Iran. *We* were doing so well,” she emphasized with much anguish in her voice.

“At first, back on the shores with Suleiman Hajji, I thought finding out that my mother was murdered somehow *freed* me of responsibility for her death. That, I’m afraid, was only *half*-true, and a half-truth can only carry one’s relief so far before the other half is needed to continue to go forward.”

“But Suleiman made this *quite* clear, didn’t he?” she asked.

Drake put his arm around Salomeh’s warm waist and pulled her closer to himself. “Everyone had a part who had a part,” he mumbled. Finding more clear words, he said, “As I just said to Benny, my part in my mother’s death was *real*: I forced her and Suleiman’s separation by literally running Sully out of town.”

Salomeh made a gentle sound to show she was thinking over his words and then replied, “He didn’t have to honor the results of that race with a boy. He was an *adult* man. He knew better.”

“Not in 1950 in rural Mazandaran,” Drake said. “Certain decisions were already made by history. Once they knew they’d been found out, there were only so many ways for things to go. Some were less disastrous than others, but *none* were happy. This triggered my mother to confess to her parents, and the rest, we know, ended brutally. So I *did* set the hands in motion by forcing him out of her life.” His voice was strained, and tears began to gather in his eyes as they had not done in many years. “A chain of irrational decisions driving existentially catastrophic actions.”

“You were young,” she tried to assure him. “A *child*.”

“It was as I prepared to come outside tonight to hit Benny that I finally understood something about all of this,” he went on. “Yes, I *was* young, so I didn’t understand their hearts and what they meant to one another. Even in the moment. I did not know, as a child, how two lovers, even in just *that* moment, *need* one another enough to transgress society’s rules and expectations. How could I know their hearts? Do you see what I mean? How *dare* I judge what my mother and her lover *needed* from one another? That is *not* my place. Child *or* adult.”

“I’m not *entirely* following your line of thought *just* yet, but I need to hear you and see you and know your mind. You are my *partner*. So keep talking.” She took his cigarette from his mouth and took a drag for herself, something she only did very rarely to avoid lighting up and committing to a full one of her own.

“I realized just before I came out to clobber Benny that I cannot know *hearts*. Even in the moment. Even when I think I have every invested right in what they’re feeling. I cannot know your heart. Or his. Any more now, all these years later, fully grown and wiser for it: the human heart is a complete mystery, even our own to ourselves—how much more, then, are the hearts of others.”

Salomeh was for a long time silent in contemplation as she considered Cyrus’ words. “These matters are as old as Khayyam and Rumi, my love. Could anyone fairly and truly consider this to have been *your* burden to carry as a *child*? Your life seems stuck on a harsh *present* standard etched by deep *past* regret.”

“I was guilty—even at that age—of putting my own childish heart and the imagined honor of my betrayed father ahead of the beating hearts of others. I must have had it in me to understand that such ponderous matters were not for *me* to resolve. So I chose to ‘resolve’ the matter based on some notion I had about everything being set straight, as if I were Paris himself carrying out the cosmic order of Homer by taking down Achilles. In an ultimate act of careless *hubris*, I...”

Salomeh put a soft finger on his lips. “Just slow it down, dear one. Slow your breathing. Your thoughts and words are *poetic*.” She slowly took a deep breath and let it go. “Be *calm*.”

After a moment, he continued. “I don’t know why you and Benny did what you did, other than what I have been told to this point. I don’t pretend to know your hearts any more deeply than I knew my mother’s and Sully’s hearts, as such intimate matters are gloriously and wondrously beyond words.”

“I wear *my* heart on my sleeve, *aziz-am*,” Salomeh assured him. “For me, it’s always pretty much what there is before you, as is, written in my dance steps across the stage. I’m used to being stared at and judged and measured and calculated and interpreted and evaluated.” Drake held Salomeh in a hug for a long time, just breathing her in, before she continued. “And frankly, that’s not just for being a *dancer*: that’s for being a *woman*. Throw in the ‘exotic’—often fetishized, let’s be one-hundred percent honest—nature of being Persian-to-the-eye, and suddenly I’m drawing to myself more *uninvited* interpretation than I care to fully deconstruct.”

Drake nodded. Sensing that Salomeh had more to say, he motioned with his hand for her to continue as she would.

“All of your talk of how the readership and viewer complete the work is well and good for completed works. Books, poems, paintings. Sure. Here we can have all of the debates we want and litter them with Barthes, Derrida, Hirsch—whomever we wish: pick a White Man blessed by the Patriarchy to support all the theoretics you wish, but do not over-apply the whitewash to the fantastic array of colors your lover supplies here-and-now as you ponder the tomes of the White Beards for their static insight and hegemony-plaster to hold life in ordered place.” She stroked his forehead with a gentle sweep of the back of her fingers.

“Because frankly, we are all works in *perpetual* progress. Living human beings who need, feel, and lust—who care too much, smoke too much, and drink ourselves blind to drown our pain and self-medicate however we learned best works for us right *now*, even if it slowly kills us as it also killed those we loved dearly, as it killed your own father, Ansel. We are all frail forms.

“As a choreographer, I can mark down my intent for the piece, setting it down in Eshkol-Wachman or another notation, and as a dancer, I can interpret and adjust when I see an audience member grimace at the very moment of the maneuver I have just carried out. So I live on both sides of those perspectives. As we all do, really, when we begin living with authentic intent.

“Without intent: I could break my or someone else’s leg out there. And I don’t mean in the theatrical sense. Have you ever heard the howl of a career-destroying shinbone *destroyed* in an instant by a hasty jump? Intent is *essential*, relativism be damned to blazes, because intent is how we *make* that progress. Knowing this, this clarity becomes our burden. Our regrets are driven by our attention to intent in an interpretive world, to some degree.”

Drake and she both took a deep breath at the same time, in complete synchronization, as if a stage play direction marked out (*beat*), or the choreographer’s gentle annotation had indicated the right moment to mind one’s cue. But just as she had said: they were living human beings, not fixed on some verso page, and so he again gently motioned for her to continue.

“So, being fully flesh and blood and *shinbone*, rather than be evaluated and analyzed and measured by eyes without at least *some* input from me, I chose the path of intent. In that sense, I would say, live with the *intent* of Hirsch and interpret others’ art per Barthes. So, to be true within this imposed false dichotomy, I decided to be as transparent and authentic as I could be in life, without being cruel, if I could avoid it. I do this so that I might at least be interpreted as closely to who I *actually* am as I can manage from my shifting mark on the stage, with the least pain.”

“That’s definitely a meaningful and *most impactful* way of reconciling those two perspectives,” Drake finally commented.

“It was cruel of me to have slept with your friend,” she then admitted. “It was no accident on my part. To pretend it was, after all we’ve said tonight, would just be adding to the cruelty.”

“I don’t expect you to apolo—”

“Cyrus, it’s not for you to *expect*. It’s *my* truth to expound: I was cruel because I want, at the core of me, to be *desired*. I am not on a stage by some accident and did not pick *this* career to be *undesirable* to the eye *or* the heart.” As Drake smiled at this revelation, she smiled and kissed the tip of his nose.

“But I don’t crave being desirable to the point that it subverts and undermines my fundamental relationships. You are my *clan* now. I would put this aside in order to help you: but instead of being asked for help, I was quietly abandoned. You abandoned me.” She leaned in for another kiss. “It seems you did that from confusion about your emotions rather than from a lack of desire for me when compared to your career. That matters *considerably* to me because we are human beings in love. So I have considered and *accept* your apology and I absolutely forgive you.”

Drake cleared his throat; his silence was due to respect, not taciturnity. He asked her: “What do *you* need from me in future?”

“I just want to know *you*. Not those deepest parts we *all* keep to ourselves, but those parts in which we share the consequences or the rewards. Knowing where I am in our *shared* landscape is only fair.” She again took his cigarette and indulged a long drag, saying as she exhaled:

“*Man goftam, aziz-am. Tamâm shod.*”⁶⁸

Cyrus Drake turned to face Salomeh Arashpour as the two stood inches apart from one another on the terrace of their condo overlooking Central Park, drenched in the beautifully star-encrusted night, and as he flew adrift in the galaxy of supernovae that was her compassionate and passionate regard, he came to understand that the whorls most in need of his scrutiny were the tapestries, landscapes, topologies, and golden ratio driven spirals of his deepest surfaces, so that he may paint—paint a *life to be lived* and not a taut canvas to be bought and sold—those images firing at the very rods and cones of his wide-open eyes, breathing and dancing before him on the balcony behind eyes of her own, beyond any mere measure, and he came at that moment to more fully ken that he was indeed a happy man.

⁶⁸ “*Man goftam, aziz-am. Tamâm shod.*” (lit. “I said [it], dear one. It’s finished.”) Salomeh has here declared: “I consider this conversation *done*.”

You *surprise* me.⁶⁹

No matter how often
or how deeply
I roll my inner eyes at you
and try to dowse you
with my arms angled
like some rune, standing
like a branch on a tree,
there will be some
instant that
you fall *ineffable*.

Crumpled brow memories,
I notice *your* eyes screw
too, and I wonder if you are
trying to mark *my* twain.

Do I *shock* you?

When I dance in your sea mist
am I *close* to you, or far
from the center of you
and your dappled reveries?

Try me through,
and if I am caught
in the examined sum
of your heart's *subtlest* lepton,
after your eye-branding,
all thought-tangled torn,
lost in the fifth dimension,
do not make me cry
either in the now (or in the escrow:

Just *apprise* me.

⁶⁹ Found by Cyrus his next class day, in a cream envelope with a Crane & Co. watermark, placed conspicuously in his notes, written in Salomeh's best hand.

Back-matter

Author's Afterword

Meta-autobiographical praxis. As discussed in *Midnight at the Arcanum: a monograph*, as long as the artist breathes, a work may evolve if the artist grows, having lived life in the meantime.

How I wish for *The Ancestral Sea: a postmodern love story* to be understood, if such a thing as understanding an artist's true *intent* through the work alone is *possible*, is as a living thing, and so I revisited *The Succubus Sea* as I did *Janus Incubus*, and I tore into my own *ad hoc* insight from across the years, making it a living thing, at least for those moments my present and past selves negotiated new light and reconciled age-old differences.

On this day, the tenth anniversary of my father's death from cancer, I understand the world and my place in it differently than I did then, from 1990 to 2001, the eleven years across which prior versions had evolved. I certainly grasp more from life events from 2007 onward: my comprehension of grief, gender, and identity struggle has permutated significantly across my psyche. This has meant emotional labor to polish and refine my thinking to honor this new light. To deeply ken *why* one has grown and know the impact of this upon others in one's sphere, and to come to understand that we are all works in *perpetual* progress.

When I first concocted *The Succubus Sea* in my mind, I was living alone in Montreal, nineteen. The initial French version (*Le pont*) was rewritten and set in Vancouver, Montreal, and Aberystwyth, Wales. Years later it became what you have read to here. This present instantiation takes into consideration that one seeks as an artist to universalize the personal so as to be accessible to as many readers as one can be. This applies to character dynamics, careless attempts to capture dynamic dialog without thought of what the words could inflict on the reader for no honest artistic purpose, and thematic icons and allusions.

The sustained literary invocation of the symbol of the succubus is fraught with ancient misogynistic oppression by the Patriarchy. Although this was never my authorial intent (in the sense of E. D. Hirsch), having come to that point in my own appreciation of the harm this icon could perpetuate, the removal of the succubus imagery and the addition of the fortification of Valery and Salomeh's places as critically important characters in this novel, brings it, I feel, to a more inclusive place, where my intent had always been. And that is where we must bring in Roland Barthes, that we may smooth the false dichotomy literature past has afforded us. Intent is meaningful only in the current context of the intender, and as living agents, we must instead seek perspectives that are diachronic, rather than immutable synchronic artifacts. Intent is a *local* contract, and we seek to be as *global* in our inclusion as possible. As society and its understandings progress, as much as we are able, our artistic identities *must* also progress; not by hiding the past lens but by bringing focus onto one's present, more inclusive vision.

The introduction of the character of Cohen Benjamin as more than the signature in a book he was in Chapter 14, taking his, Salomeh, and Drake's guest scenes from the ending of *Janus Incubus*, removed when that became *Midnight at the Arcanum*, presented an opportunity to revisit Cyrus Drake's relationships with *men* and to address issues of toxic masculinity and Drake's previously one-sided perspective of seeing physical infidelity as something that had been perpetrated against him and his father (both *male* characters), rather than as the complex matter of the gender-agnostic *human* heart that it always is at its core, thereby beginning the dismantling of generationally entrenched false gender-role dichotomies in matters of love and relationships. His acceptance of his *actual* role in his mother's death is finalized as having been more fully processed when he accepts and openly admits to Salomeh that he has been neglecting their relationship, freeing them to move forward together on their *shared* journey.

If this be error and upon me proved,
I never [lived], nor no [one] ever loved.

—Burnaby, 1 February 2024

Historical Contextual Notes

While this is a *novel*, the characters alive within its vista and the many geopolitical events that have impacted their stories, are not meant to be portrayed as if they erupted from an historical vacuum, and thus these brief notes, plaiting fact and fiction, are offered to bring a sense of context to events, places, *Zeitgeists*, and times across which the characters have been portrayed.



circa 700 BCE

Homer and other poets tell of the Trojan War of a mythic past, two events of which being the most resonant in young Cyrus Drake's mind: Grief stricken at Patroclus' death at Hector's hand, Achilles sets up funeral games in his honor. As the war nears its end, Paris, with Apollo's divine aid, fells Achilles with an arrow aimed at to his one weakness: his uncharmed heel.

539 BCE

After his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus the Great, first *Shahanshah* (King of Kings) of Persia, liberates the Hebrews and allows them to return to Israel to rebuild the Temple (Isaiah 45:1, Ezra 1:1-4). In a bid to protect Hyrcanian trade routes, he orders infrastructure to be built, which includes a coastal frontier citadel built near present-day Ramsar, Mazandaran, named by the locals *Tars-Dejh* ("dread citadel") and eventually the local fishing village of *Tarsdejh* is established nearby. In time, the Caspian citadel falls to ruin.

331 BCE

The Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great, defeats Persian Emperor Darius III at the Battle of Gaugamela, toppling the Achaemenid Empire. Four years later, in a bid to consolidate his control of the region, he marries Roxana, a Bactrian princess, during his campaigns into the areas now known as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Their son, Alexander IV, whom Alexander does not live to see, is murdered at fourteen years of age.

636

The Battle of al-Qadisiyyah unfolds, marking a pivotal victory for the Islamic Rashidun Caliphate's forces against the Persian Sassanian Empire. This victory signals the downfall of the Sassanian dynasty and paves the way for Persia's eventual integration into the Islamic Caliphate. The conquest of Persia initiates the Islamic Golden Age in the region, catalyzing significant advancements in culture, science, and architecture, alongside the widespread adoption of Islam and Arabic across Persia. This transformation alters the political and religious landscape, steering the historical trajectory of the region for centuries.

1048-1131

Hakim Omar Khayyam of Nishapur, Persian polymath, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher, and poet, thrives in the 11th and 12th centuries, making significant contributions across algebra, geometry, and philosophy. He develops a geometric method to solve cubic equations, influencing the field profoundly. As an astronomer, he suggests the Jalali calendar reform, accurately calculating the solar year's length. Khayyam is most celebrated for his *Rubaiyat*, a collection of quatrains delving into love, mortality, and existence. Though initially renowned as a scientist and mathematician, Khayyam's poetic legacy overshadows his many scientific achievements, captivating global audiences with its enduring wisdom and beauty.

circa 1564-1616

William Shakespeare emerges as the English Renaissance's most luminous beacon. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, in the reign of Elizabeth I, his genius permeates the core of English society, reflecting its complexities, beauties, and contradictions. A playwright and poet of unparalleled talent, his *opus* navigates the human condition with a depth that transcends his time. From the tragic depths of *Hamlet* to the morally complex scenarios of *Measure for Measure*, which navigates the storms of justice, morality, and mercy, his works are produced on the stages of London and beyond, earning the adoration of both the commons and the court, and are still performed by fervent thespians for eager audiences to present. As the wider world is marked by the exploration of new lands, the sectarian clashes, and the quest for power, his pen captures the essence of humanity, its vices, and its virtues. Several thousand words in use today were first captured by the Bard, as are many idioms: when someone *breaks the ice* they have *Taming of the Shrew* (Act I Scene II) to thank for the conversation that follows.

1921-1925

Reza Khan, a military officer in the Persian Cossack Brigade under Ahmad Shah Qajar, last Shah of the Qajar dynasty, leads a coup d'état and installs himself as the ruler of Persia, first as Prime Minister, and then as Reza Shah Pahlavi. His modernization efforts are seen by some as welcome, and by others as too rapid and Western. He is criticized for his authoritarianism.

1936

Ansel Drake is assigned as a neutral observer during the Spanish Civil War and travels Spain throughout the duration of the conflict.

Context: The US has a strong specific interest in gathering intelligence during this conflict due to the involvement of countries such as Germany and the general unrest building across Europe. Germany, supporting Franco's Nationalists, under the guise of the Condor Legion, tests its burgeoning military might, employing its bombers and other technologies extensively for the first time in actual combat. This involvement not only provides Germany with invaluable combat experience but also showcases the devastating effectiveness of aerial warfare, marking a significant evolution in military strategy. The use of these bombers, including tactics of aerial bombardment of civilian targets, foreshadows the brutal aerial campaigns of World War II. Intelligence gathered becomes critical to buttressing against Germany's anticipated expansion into Europe.

1939

Ansel Drake, now a covert officer in the US Military Intelligence Division (MID), is sent to the Caspian area near Reza Shah's Ramsar Palace. He is to lead survey missions in strategic anticipation of establishing what is later known as the Persian Corridor, under the pretext of working with the locals as a "consulting civil engineer" on the improvement the mountain pass infrastructure, as part of the Shah's mandates for modernization.

Context: Europe is on the brink of World War II. The strategic significance of the Caspian region is becoming clear due to its geographical proximity to the USSR and the strategic foresight that a prolonged Soviet front against Germany will lead to beleaguered troops and diminishing resources. Having free access to Northwestern Mazandaran and West Azerbaijan provinces and being able to quickly build relationships within local communities, give Ansel strategic access to a key region in the Corridor.

1940

Ansel Drake falls in love with, is given permission to marry, and has a child with Noushin Hayadarzadeh, a local Mazandarani woman who lives in Tarsdejh, his center of surveying operations.

Context: In 1940, as World War II intensifies in Europe, a latent MID officer's duties in the Northwestern Mazandaran coastal region include building key local relationships in ever widening circles around the region's most strategic future supply line positions. Ansel's deep connection with and eventual marriage to Noushin, fostered amidst his carrying out his intelligence activities, reflects the realities of day-to-day life while covert reconnaissance and other military duty intertwine, as he also all the while remains integrated socially in the field. Even this near to the official US entry into the Second World War, his true role and mission in Iran are classified and outside the knowledge of even his new wife.

1941

Following the US entry into the war, Ansel and Suleiman Hajj, his local liaison and friend, both join the European Front. The intelligence gathered during their prior joint role becomes critical to the Persian Corridor.

Context: In August, Reza Shah Pahlavi is deposed during the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran. In his place, his son, Mohammed Reza, is installed as Shah of Iran, and is friendly to the Allies. The Persian Corridor allows the Allies to supply the USSR with weapons, ammunition, vehicles, fuel, and foodstuffs from 1941 until 1945.

1945

After World War II ends, Ansel returns to Iran, officially honorably discharged, reunites with his family, and is granted permanent residency in Mazandaran Province to continue unofficial intelligence work.

Context: Staying on in this region near the old Persian Corridor might be considered advantageous due to the Caspian Sea's strategic significance, as it becomes a focal point in the emerging Cold War dynamics, requiring continued vigilance and quiet intelligence efforts. Given post-war tension in this region, those already having connections in and the trust of the community are considered potential future assets and permitted some degree of freedom within this framework.

1950

The Korean War begins. Ansel Drake volunteers for service. Angry at what she feels is abandonment of the family by her husband, Noushin enters into an affair with Suleiman Hajj, whose World War II injury to his leg won't allow for service. She is tragically murdered by her family for her self-confessed adultery with Hajj, who flees to Turkey through Tabriz.

Context: The Korean War reflects the intensifying Cold War. Initiated by UN Security Council Resolution 82 on 25 June 1950, twenty-one nations contribute UN troops. Iran under Mohammad Reza Shah is increasingly influenced by US foreign policy, but Iran does not send troops. Intelligence officers with Ansel Drake's critical combat-zone background might readily be reactivated, stating that they "volunteered" in an effort to keep their true role from even their own family circle to maintain plausible deniability and operational secrecy. Moreover, a critical intelligence officer might well be denied compassionate discharge without a formal explanation.

1953

The Korean War ends and Ansel Drake relocates to the USA with Cyrus. They settle in Manhattan, where Ansel's brother, Andrew, has been living as a confirmed bachelor in his Greenwich Village townhouse.

Context: Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, voted into his position in 1951 by popular vote, having begun a program that includes nationalizing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now British Petroleum), is overthrown in a US and British covertly coordinated coup d'état, codenamed Operation Ajax, increasing the Shah's power and changing Iran's political trajectory.

1962

Cyrus Drake and his good friend Reuben "Rube" Hurst volunteer for USMC service and ask to be put to active duty in Vietnam.

Context: The Vietnam War has been escalating, characterized by intense conflict and looming global implications. At this time, the US is increasing its military involvement, sending more advisors and support to South Vietnam to assist in countering the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces. Meanwhile, Iran experiences escalating domestic social and political unrest, reflecting the broader dynamics of the era.

1966

Having been promoted over four years of active duty to sergeant, and Rube to corporal, Cyrus and Rube return to Manhattan, where Cyrus' father and uncle both now share Andrew's townhouse. Cyrus returns to college studies to upgrade from BA to MFA and becomes a college English Literature instructor as he searches for meaning from his life.

Context: The US, with the boom of youth activism, is experiencing significant cultural changes and controversies over the Vietnam War externally and the Civil Rights Movement and the injustices of segregation.

1967

Pahlavi officially adopts the title *Shahanshah Arya-Mehr* (King-of-Kings, Light-of-the-Aryans) during his coronation ceremony held at Golestan Palace in Teheran. His wife, Empress Farah, also plays a significant role in the ceremony, adorned with regal attire and jewels.

Context: Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the Shah's adoption of the title *Shahanshah Arya-Mehr* during a lavish coronation ceremony serves multiple purposes, including to bolster a unified national identity under an Aryan-centric homogeneity, drawing from the historic grandeur of Iran's imperial past, but actively suppressing non-Aryan ethnic voices. This move also reinforces his domestic authority while positioning Iran as a vital ally in the global political landscape, particularly in the context of the US-Soviet Cold War. The US, seeking to counter perceived Soviet influence in the Middle East, supports the Shah's regime as a bulwark against communism, providing military aid and economic support to bolster Iran's stability, despite growing domestic opposition and unrest.

1969

Soraya and her husband Farokh Arashpour, both medical doctors, relocate to Heidelberg, Germany, with Soraya's parents.

Context: There is significant migration of professionals from Iran during this period, including amongst medical doctors. The Shah's social reforms effectively put limits on where many early-career doctors can practice. Dissatisfaction with such limitations in the broader climate of social and political unrest and uncertainty pushes a number of highly qualified individuals into the Western economies, where their skills are welcomed.

1971

In Heidelberg, Germany, Soraya and Farokh welcome their daughter, Salomeh.

Context: The early 1970s in Germany are marked by a period of economic growth and political stability, making it an attractive destination for socio-economic immigrants. Iranian professionals (medical and otherwise) are increasingly shifting their practices to countries outside Iran as resistance to the Shah's restrictive policies both here and in areas of education begin to impact career autonomy, reflecting a broader movement of skilled individuals seeking opportunities abroad due to political and career-related hurdles in Iran. As such, children of these professionals begin to be born outside of their parents' ancestral homeland.

1976

Cyrus Drake pulls up stakes and moves to San Francisco to pursue a career as a painter, supporting himself financially with his position as an editor at a well-respected literary press. Reuben Hurst remains in New York.

Context: The bicentennial in the U.S. is marked by cultural shifts, while in Iran, opposition to the Shah's regime, fueled by deep-seated grievances over political repression, socio-economic inequalities, and perceived Western interference in Iranian affairs, is growing.

1978-1979

The Iranian Revolution, which begins in January 1978 and culminates in February 1979, leads to the overthrow and exile of Shah Pahlavi and his family and to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini becoming the Republic's Supreme Leader.

Context: This revolution, and the events surrounding it, dramatically alters Iran's political landscape and drastically impacts US-Iran relations. The new regime, although initially characterized by a coalition of forces united against the Shah on matters of socio-political and anti-oppressive common ground, quickly becomes dominated by hardline elements led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who returns from exile in France to become the ideological center of the regime. This shift leads to the active sidelining and suppression of more moderate and secular voices, including leftist groups, intellectuals, and women's rights activists.

1980

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi dies in exile in Cairo, Egypt. His family members remain in exile. The Iran-Iraq War begins when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein launches a military invasion of Iran. Cyrus Drake leaves his position as the Head of Literary Acquisitions at the press and becomes a fully self-supporting professional painter, working with Russel McGuire, who has formed an agency around Drake's body of painting.

Context: Pahlavi's death marks the symbolic end of the Pahlavi monarchy and the era of secular rule in Iran. It further fuels the resolve of the Republic's leaders, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, to solidify their grip on power and establish a theocratic government. Internationally, it heightens tensions in the region and relations between Iran and the Western world are greatly strained, particularly the United States, which had been closely allied with the former Shah's regime. Meanwhile, the Iran-Iraq War will rage on until 1988, claiming an estimated total of between 300,000 and 600,000 Iranian lives.

1994

Cyrus meets Salomeh Arashpour, granddaughter of Badria, a close friend of his mother, on arrival in New York to attend his father, Ansel Drake's, funeral. Due to his celebrity as a contemporary expressionist painter who will pull in the very best students, he is offered on-the-spot a teaching position as Senior Artist-in-Residence and as part of his package, is able to relocate from San Francisco to Manhattan's Plaza District, where he moves into a condominium near the MoMA and with a full view of Central Park. They almost instantly form a mutual attraction and connection, and Salomeh moves in with Cyrus within a month, at Cyrus' behest. He also asks her to visit Tarsdejh, his hometown, and the hometown of her parents and grandparents, near the coming *Nowruz* (New Year's) celebration.

Context: Iran, under President Rafsanjani, is experiencing internal political shifts and attempts to rebuild relations with Western nations. The significant age difference between Cyrus and Salomeh is held alongside the fact that Badria has known Cyrus from birth and was a lifelong friend of his mother. This and his having avoided even a whiff of celebrity scandal are all factors that would balance the scales toward such a relationship as being considered *sharaf* (reputable) in the eyes of the broader Persian community, an acceptance that is critical.

1995

Cyrus and Salomeh visit Tarsdejh in Mazandaran Province, Cyrus' birth town using forged marriage papers due to the fact that a cohabiting unmarried couple would not be permitted joint travel under the theocratic rules within Iran. During his visit, Cyrus learns the truth of his mother's drowning in 1950, when her former lover, Suleiman Hajj explains to him that she confessed her adultery to her parents, and her father and brothers drowned her in the Caspian.

Context: In the mid-1990s, Iran, under the presidency of Rafsanjani, is undergoing a period of cautious openness towards the West and its diaspora. However, this openness is still bounded by the conservative and cautious approach of the government, especially concerning those with Western ties returning to Iran. Rafsanjani's administration, while seeking to improve Iran's international standing and attract expatriates, remains vigilant in controlling social norms within the country.

1996

With Cyrus Drake's support and an agent on each coast working on his behalf, contemporary American painter Reuben Hurst, after many years of trying to break into the New York scene, has a hugely successful showing and begins to get noticed and make significant waves, and he is hailed by some in the art world as Manhattan's Blue-Collar Klimt. Drake, now fully back with his painting at a level he is happy with, pushes forward into a period of renewed productivity. The novelist Cohen Benjamin, an old friend from his old Syncopated Cup bar crowd days in San Francisco, calls him up for a ride after having arrived in New York for talks with his publisher, and Drake invites him to stay at his condo during his visit, testing the limits of forgiveness across the relationships of all touched by the visit's aftermath and its underlying causes.

70 تمام شد

⁷⁰ *Tamām shod* ("It is finished"), the traditional ending in Persian tales that begin with *yeki bud, yeki na bud*, or collections of poems.