'Truly mesmerising'
Scotland on Sunday

The Good Daughter

My mother's hidden life

Jasmin Darznik

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About the Book

One day shortly after her father's death, when Jasmin Darznik is helping her mother move house, a photograph falls from a stack of old letters. The girl in it is her mother. She is wearing a wedding veil, and at her side stands a man whom Jasmin has never seen before.

Despite Jasmin's pleas, her mother Lili refuses to say anything about the photograph, and Jasmin returns home to New Jersey frustrated and confused. But months later, she receives the first of ten cassette tapes from her mother revealing a wrenching hidden story of her family's true origins in Iran: Lili's troubled history of abuse and neglect, and a daughter she was forced to abandon in order to escape that life. The final tape reveals that Jasmin's sister, Sara – the Good Daughter – is still living in Iran.

In this sweeping, poignant and beautifully written memoir, Jasmin skilfully weaves the stories of three generations of Iranian women into a unique tale of one family's struggle for freedom. The result is an enchanting and unforgettable story of secrets, betrayal, and the unbreakable mother-daughter bond.

About the Author

Jasmin Darznik was born in Tehran, Iran. A former attorney, she received her Ph.D. from Princeton University. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle*, and other publications. She has taught Iranian literature at the University of Virginia and is a professor of English and creative writing at Washington and Lee University. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The Good Daughter

My Mother's Hidden Life

JASMIN DARZNIK

WINDMILL BOOKS

For my mother and grandmother

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Prologue

LIKE ALL THE photographs that came with us when we left Iran, this one was as supple and as thick as leather. Its edges were tattered and a long white crease coursed through the image. I might easily have mistaken it for just another old photograph, but this one was nothing like the others.

The girl in it was my mother, Lili, and though she couldn't be older than fourteen, someone had rimmed her eyes with kohl and darkened her mouth with a lipstick so deep it looked black in the picture. Her dress was satin, pulled taut across her torso and pinched at the waist, and her shoulders turned in awkwardly where a wedding veil skimmed her body. The man at her side was not my father. I'd never seen him before. He wore a gray fedora with his tuxedo and his right hand encircled my mother's waist with surprisingly elegant fingers.

A bride, I realized with a start, she'd once been this stranger's bride.

Nearly as astonishing as this revelation was my mother's expression in the photograph. Eyes fixed on the distance and lower lip pouting, she looked as if the next shot would have shown her crying. I had never known my proud Iranian mother to look like that.

I sat stunned, gripping the photograph between my thumb and forefinger, unable to look away. I was sitting in my mother's house, a house to which I'd never imagined I'd

return. It was late in the afternoon, five weeks after my father's funeral; I was helping her go through his things and this photograph had fallen from a stack of letters whose Persian script my eyes could no longer follow. A photograph hidden, forgotten, and now found.

Iranians would likely shrug at such a discovery, lift their eyes toward the heavens, and sum up its meaning as *qesmat*, or destiny. This was a word I'd hear often in the days following my father's death. *Qesmat*, my mother told me, had brought me back to California. I hadn't seen her in nearly a year when she called to tell me my father was in the hospital and that I had to come home … *now*. I left my apartment on the East Coast without even packing a suitcase. He died before my plane landed in San Francisco, but I returned to my parents' house still unready for tears.

My mother and I grieved at a distance, each of us in her own way. Lili's friends encircled her, crying with her and soothing her and praying with her day after day. I kept to myself. I did not cry. Then, three days after the funeral, I drove my mother to the airport. Together we watched my father's body, housed now in a black-ribboned coffin, being hoisted onto the plane that would carry him across the ocean to Germany, the home he'd given up when he moved to Iran in the sixties to marry my mother. The sky that morning was a rare December blue and nearly cloudless. "*Qesmat*," she whispered as the plane arched out of sight, and at this, finally, I cried.

We'd been a world of our own once, my mother Lili and I, a constant, intimate twosome beyond which I could imagine nothing, least of all myself. Then we came to America and I started turning into an American girl. That's when she began telling me about The Good Daughter. The Good Daughter lived in Iran. She didn't talk back—as I had learned to do in this *kharab shodeh*, this broken-down

place. Actually, she didn't talk much at all. The Good Daughter listened. She understood—always—about manners and modesty. She didn't wander off to play in the streets by herself. The Good Daughter sat by her mother's side and heeded her mother's words. When a man looked at her, she lowered her eyes at once. And she was very, very pretty, with a sweet face and long, flowing hair just like the maidens in Persian miniatures.

Over the years The Good Daughter became a taunt, a warning, an omen. When I spoke immodestly, when I wore my skirts too short or let boys flirt with me, I was not my mother's real daughter, her Good Daughter. "If you become like the girls here," she'd say, "I'll go back to Iran to live with my Good Daughter."

The Good Daughter I knew back then was just a story she'd made up to scare me and make me into a good daughter, too. It was like my mother to tell such stories to keep me close and to keep me good. But I didn't want anything to do with The Good Daughter of my mother's Iranian world. The less I resembled her, the better it suited me. By the time I found the photograph of my mother as a young bride, I'd left home, as girls in this country always do and no true Iranian daughter ever would.

And yet for forty days after my father's death I stayed in my parents' house, smiling and nodding like The Good Daughter of my mother's stories while her friends dropped by in the afternoons in their lace-trimmed veils and carefully made-up eyes. "What will she do now?" they whispered to each other, and for forty days I served them tea and quietly watched them eyeing her for clues.

The house was finally empty the day I found the photograph, the funeral rites complete and the visitors gone. The platters of dates and pastries and fruit had all been cleared away and cardboard boxes lay scattered on the floor of every room of the house. I worked long into the afternoon, packing up my mother's clothes, bills, letters,

and leather-bound photo albums. In one of the spare bedrooms I came across my father's books of Rilke, Kant, and Khayyám and also my grandmother Kobra's prayer shawl, rosary, and gilt-trimmed Koran. In my old bedroom closet I found the Gypsy dolls my grandmother sewed me years ago in Iran and a Persian picture book defaced by my own childish scribbles.

My mother and I were alone in the house where she could no longer afford to live, and when the photograph slipped loose from a bundle of letters she was upstairs sleeping with an open bottle of Valium on the table beside her bed.

I carried the photograph to the living room and sat cross-legged on the floor for a long time, staring up at the large black-and-white portrait of my parents on their wedding day. Tehran, 1962. She, raven haired with Cleopatra eyes, plays Elizabeth Taylor to my father's blond and slightly sheepish Richard Burton. I grew up with this portrait and all the stories my mother loved to tell about her wedding to my father. Every pair of eyes, she'd told me, had trailed her on the day she married her *damad farangi*, her European groom. As proof of who she'd been, of what our country had once been, she hung this picture in every home we ever owned in America: the tract house in Terra Linda, the five-bedroom house in the Tiburon hills, the villa on Richardson Bay. If, for many years, someone had asked me to tell them about Iran, I would have pointed to this photograph of my parents, as if every story began there, in that moment.

Now I'd found a photograph that had survived revolution, war, exile, and something else besides: my mother's will to forget the past. Although I couldn't yet imagine the stories it would tell, I slipped it between the pages of a book and carried it three thousand miles away.

Six months later I was back in California, sitting in the new in-law unit my mother had managed to carve out from her Spanish-style villa. The rest of the house was rented out by then, and she was living in two small rooms cluttered with everything she'd salvaged after my father's death. She'd given up entertaining her friends, said the space was too cramped to serve a proper tea, so what was the point of inviting anyone over anymore?

By then I'd looked at the photograph so many times I could have drawn its every detail from memory. Who, I'd wonder again and again, was the man at her side? What had happened to him? And why had my mother never told me about their marriage?

For a long time her grief over my father's death, and my own, had made it impossible to ask her these questions. Six months had passed and still I didn't know how to begin. But the photograph lingered in my mind. I had to know the truth, no matter how painful it would be for me to ask about it or for her to answer my questions.

I cleared my throat. "*Maman*," I said at last, and held the photograph out to her.

She glanced down at it and then scanned my face, trying to decipher what, if anything, I understood and what she could still stop me from knowing. She shook her head and continued drinking her tea. "No," she murmured finally, averting her eyes. "This has nothing at all to do with you." She set her cup down, snatched the photograph from my hand, and left the room.

I didn't mention the photograph again. The next days passed awkwardly, each of us holding herself apart from the other, and I was grateful to return to the East Coast. We didn't speak again for some weeks, but a few days into the beginning of the new university term she called me and accused me of rifling through her things. I'd stolen the photograph from her, she said, and there was just nothing else to say.

Then she started sending me the tapes. The first one arrived in springtime, a few weeks after No Rooz, the Iranian New Year. Eventually there would be ten of them. That year my mother Lili would sit alone in her house in California, speaking the story of her life into a tape recorder for me. The tapes always came marked up in Persian, and I couldn't make out much more than my name when I opened the envelope and found the first one. As I traced my mother's inscription with my fingertips, it occurred to me that I didn't even own a cassette player. The next morning I headed into town to buy one, and with that her story began to pass like a secret life between us.

One

Avenue Moniriyeh

“If you want to know my story,” my mother Lili began, “you have to know about Avenue Moniriyeh, about your grandmother Kobra and your grandfather Sohrab, and what Iran was then. Because we couldn’t just do what you do here—forget your name and who you belong to. Our lives were not like that. No.”

WHEN SHE NAMED her ninth child, Pargol Amini indulged her own fancies at last. “Kobra,” she announced to the midwife, and smiled from the bloodstained sheets. The “great one.”

At this, the midwife looked up and considered her face.

Pargol Amini had black eyes and cheeks so fair and flushed they were like snow blotted with blood, as was said back then. In a room that had grown warm and damp with her exertions, she met the midwife’s gaze with a heavy stare.

“Kobra,” Pargol said again, her voice softer but still sure. Even the newborn—a tiny raging bundle with a shock of black hair—was silent at that moment. The scent of cinnamon and cardamom rose from the kitchen and threaded its way through the house. The midwife took in a single sharp breath, bit her lip, and then resumed her task of dusting my great-grandmother’s loins with ashes.

When Pargol was a girl she and her family had left their village in the south, journeyed a hundred miles across

Iran’s dusty, red-rimmed central plateau, and settled in the then-walled capital city of Tehran. Though she could not read and had never been to school, she could recite the Koran by heart from beginning to end in Arabic—God’s tongue—and she knew most of the hadith as well.

The names of Pargol’s other eight children had been chosen under the watchful gaze of her father-in-law. Together they made up an unremarkable roster of Muslim names: Ali-Reza, Qasem, Fatemeh, Abolfazl, Mohammad, Ali-Ahmad, Khadijeh, Zahra. But by the time of this child’s birth, Pargol’s father-in-law was dead and she, barely thirty, was already called old, and so on that day in 1921 the list of her children’s names settled finally on one born of her own imagination. Kobra.

Later it was commonly suspected that Pargol had lost her mind. Everyone feared for the child. But Kobra grew up to be the prettiest girl of the family, with the only pair of honey-colored eyes in the house. And with her beauty came a temperament so gentle that it dispelled every rumor about her mother’s willfulness and her own virtue.

Around her neck Kobra wore a black string from which a single tiny blue eye hung and nestled itself in the hollow of her throat. The amulet was meant to protect her from the Evil Eye that since the day of Kobra’s birth had bedeviled Pargol—so fearful was she that jealous eyes would alight on her favorite child.

In Iran they call such children the pearls of their mothers’ fortunes.

The Aminis’ house sat in an alleyway barely wide enough for two people to walk side by side, and along the middle of it ran the *joob*. These were the open waterways that once traversed the entire length of Tehran, north to south. The *joob* water started out clear and cold at the foot of Damavand, the snowcapped volcano to the north of the

capital, but by the time it reached Pargol's house near the old southern gates of the city the stream had become thickly clogged with refuse and dirt. Every day there were stories of boys who'd wandered far from home, fallen into live waterways somewhere in the city, and returned in damp clothes—something for which they'd surely be beaten, since the *joob* was known to carry ringworm, typhoid, and diphtheria and they'd been warned many times not to play near it.

When women ventured into the streets at all, they did so always with the fear that their veils would dip into the waters of the *joob* and render them *najes*, or impure. But peddlers wended their way daily through the alleyways, their wooden carts piled high with onions, herbs, vegetables, and fruits. When their wheels ran into the *joob* or ruts and bumps—of which there were many then throughout the capital—the clatter of pots and pans stopped briefly, then started up again once the peddlers hauled their carts onto a smoother patch of road. Long-haired, cloaked dervishes were also known to traverse the city, hawking poems, soothsayings, and tonics as they went. It could be said that the streets belonged to the peddlers and dervishes and also to the beggars who lined the stone walls of all such neighborhoods.

The house itself was built of hand-hewn bricks, with honeysuckle and jasmine spilling over the high walls that enclosed it. The large colony of sisters and aunts and mothers and grandmothers within never left except to attend a wedding or funeral close by or else to make a pilgrimage to a martyr's shrine. And for that they always traveled with their men.

Every seven days from behind the walls of her house, Pargol heard the plaintive cry of the *namaki*, the salt-seller. Humpbacked and toothless, he roamed the city with his salt borne on the back of an ancient donkey. Every few blocks he'd cup his fingers around his mouth, tip his head to the

sky, and call out, "*Namaki! Namaki!*" When she heard his cry, Pargol would throw her chador about her and poke her head out the door for her weekly slab of salt.

Pargol had married a rug merchant by the name of Qoli Amini, known better as Qoli Khan, or Sir Qoli. He stood a full head shorter than his wife, a predicament that, true to both his nature and his outlook on life, he regarded with a mixture of disbelief and amusement. Every day Qoli Khan set out for the great canopied bazaar in the center of the city. Once there, he'd take his place next to the fruit-seller's pyramids of melons, pomegranates, oranges, bundles of mint and parsley, and crates of dried figs and mulberries. Perched on an enormous gunnysack of salted almonds, his complete inventory of rugs beside him, he waited in the bazaar from morning to night so that people could consider his wares and pay him the modest sums with which Pargol managed their lives.

As Kobra grew, Pargol favored her in a thousand quiet ways, but the strength of her affections was never more evident than when the Bloodletter came calling. This happened twice a year, once at the end of summer and once at the end of winter. Bloodletting was thought to keep a body healthy and strong, proof of which could be found in the rosy tint it lent to even the most sallow complexion. But no matter how many times they were reminded of the treatment's benefits, nothing kept the children from running at the sight of the Bloodletter's blistering cups and the jar of slithering black leeches she harvested from provincial riverbanks.

Pargol brooked no resistance. Hands on hips, jaw set, she routed her children out of their hiding places throughout the house. She sent her sons in first, and then one by one she pinned the girls' plaits to the tops of their heads. When the Bloodletter finished with the boys, she

sliced the girls' backs with a razor and pressed her cups to the cuts or else planted her leeches onto their bare backs. Kobra's siblings hollered or whimpered, each according to his or her disposition and the vigor of their respective treatments. Pargol always suffered their torments without blinking, but she could not bear to hear her youngest daughter so much as whimper, and so year after year Kobra was left unmolested in her hiding place behind the water cistern in the basement.

Still, when Pargol decided to send eleven-year-old Kobra from the house to learn a trade, not even a long history of such indulgences could stop mouth after mouth from falling open. A girl stayed in her father's house until her marriage, and even the less pious would have agreed that formal education was wasted on females. But soon after Kobra turned eleven, Pargol predicted that as the last of so many children it was unlikely Kobra would ever marry. For this reason, Pargol explained, it would be necessary to send Kobra to a school that prepared young girls to become professional seamstresses.

Many secretly believed that Pargol wished to keep this one child for herself, and that it was for this reason that of all her daughters it was Kobra whom she sent forth to study and work. But whatever the reason, from then on Kobra could be seen each morning stepping into the streets of Tehran, kerchief knotted at her chin, with a basket of fabric and needles in one hand and a small iron pot filled with rice and stew in the other.

There were twelve other students in her class, all of them from families poorer than her own, but she made her first friends sitting side by side on the floor with those girls. Their teacher, Malekeh Khanoom or "Mrs. Queen," was a round-faced widow with long hennaed hair and two thick rows of gold bracelets dancing at her wrists, and she laughed easily with the girls. In the mornings she taught them to sew and in the afternoons she taught them to

embroider. From the fabrics—silk, velvet, georgette, voile, crepe de chine—Kobra guessed that the garments she would be sewing were meant for the fine ladies of the city, and it thrilled her to run her fingers along the glorious bolts of fabric stacked along one wall of Malekeh Khanoom's basement and to imagine the materials skimming a woman's body here, clinging to it there.

Malekeh Khanoom showed the girls how to measure with their hands, spreading her fingers wide like a fan and counting off from the tip of her thumb to the tip of her pinkie. One, two, three. Ample figures would still be in fashion for another few years, and a waist the width of three outstretched hands was considered ideal in the days that Kobra sat in Malekeh Khanoom's basement learning her trade. The girls watched their teacher and then, shyly at first, spread their own fingers against the fabrics she set at their feet. One, two, three. They looked up to make sure they had measured well, and when Malekeh Khanoom had nodded and smiled at every one of them they took turns cutting the fabric with Malekeh Khanoom's only pair of brass scissors.

The girls themselves wore cotton pantaloons with *sheleeteh*, the short, flounced skirts of a curious provenance. The story went that once, during the nineteenth century, a Qajar king had been shown a photograph of some ballerinas on a Paris stage and was so taken by the sight that he set out for France posthaste. During the trip he became an avid patron of the ballet, coincidentally running up stupendous bills at the Paris brothels. These he settled by selling the French government rights to carry out archaeological expeditions in Iran and to retain whatever artifacts they unearthed. On his return, the Qajar king decreed that all the ladies of his court should henceforth appear dressed in tutus. Out of modesty the Iranian princesses wore their silken skirts with long tunics and flowing trousers or white tights

underneath. The skirts were given a Persian name, *sheleeteh*, which suggested the rustling sounds they made when the ladies of the Qajari palaces danced in them.

Now that the Qajars had been overthrown in favor of the Pahlavi dynasty and Western clothes had become a matter of not just fashion but also royal mandate, only poor women still dressed in *sheleeteh* and their skirts were made of plain cotton, not silk, and issued no pleasing rustles when they walked. My grandmother's only *sheleeteh* was apricot colored, and it had belonged first to Pargol, who had worn it to cross the desert so many years ago.

Sometimes Malekeh Khanoom let her students keep remnants from the dresses they sewed. In her first month at the school, Kobra chose two squares of voile and with them she sewed two scarves. One was blue like a robin's egg and the other crimson as a pomegranate seed. She had no pearls or golden coins, and so she embroidered them with a handful of tiny turquoise beads. She took the two scarves home to Pargol, who wore them constantly—one day the blue one, the next day the red one—with great pleasure, and more than a little pride.

The first year Kobra went to Malekeh Khanoom's school as a student, but she was so clever and hardworking that the second year she went as an assistant and the third year as a teacher herself.

Then one night Kobra's brother Ali-Ahmad, the gambler, put forth a proposition that altered my grandmother's fortunes forever. One evening, after losing a great sum of money—his greatest loss yet in what would be a long and infamous career—Ali-Ahmad turned to his gambling opponent and said, "You can take my sister in marriage." He did not name her at all but added simply, "The youngest one."

Ali-Ahmad knew his friend Sohrab had reason enough to accept the offer, but most likely neither of them spoke of it that night or any other. Whether Ali-Ahmad regretted this later no one in the family could ever say. They'd only remember that when he returned home that night with news that he'd found Kobra a suitor the news was met with unbridled glee.

Kobra's sisters, themselves all recently married, tittered and giggled; her aunts clucked their tongues and smiled. Sohrab was so handsome and cut such a fine figure in the neighborhood that even Pargol took Ali-Ahmad's news as a stroke of incredibly good luck. By the next morning Kobra's aunts and sisters had already begun to sew and embroider a crimson tunic and flounced wedding skirt, and by week's end they'd pooled their monies to buy Kobra a pair of wooden platform shoes at the bazaar. Malekeh Khanoom, Kobra's sewing instructor, lent out her string of tiny blinking lights (a treasure from *farang*, or Europe, it was rumored), which Pargol, in a fit of creative inspiration, nestled into Kobra's wedding veil. And with Kobra so outfitted and Ali-Ahmad's debts neatly covered by what would have been Kobra's bride price, my fourteen-year-old grandmother became, for a time, an *aroos*.

In those years a young bride had no name. Known simply as the *aroos*, or "the bride," she truly took her husband's name only when her mother-in-law died. When Kobra was called *aroos*, her hair fell in two black braids, thick as coiled ropes, down to the middle of her back. She was shy, neat, and modest, which Sohrab knew would endear her to his mother, a woman known to all as Khanoom, "Missus." But however beautiful Kobra's eyes and plaits of black hair, she was simple, provincial, and as unlikely a match for my grandfather, with his elegance and airs, as, it would seem, she was for her own fantastical name.

Sohrab was the first son born to Khanoom after two daughters, and as such he was also her *cheshmeh cheraq*, the very light of her eyes. By the time Sohrab was two years old, his father had already quit their house on Avenue Moniriyeh and taken three other wives. He'd also long since stopped sending his first wife any money. Khanoom lived by her hands, sewing and knitting, and raising Sohrab and her other children on her own. When, one by one, her husband's other three wives showed up at her door, passed over just as she herself had been, she took them in, too, and they lived in her house like sisters and worked alongside her.

Since his earliest days Sohrab had been spoiled with the attentions of the many women of his mother's house. As a boy he was known as the little dandy in their midst, and they sewed all his clothes themselves and ironed them for him, too, even when he was no more than three or four years old and they would not have thought to do the same for their own best garments. Between their endless rounds of sewing and knitting and cooking and cleaning, they plucked the seeds of pomegranates and fed them to him from a bowl. They saved him the soft-bellied figs from their garden and popped them into his mouth whenever he came to sit with the women in the kitchen. And Sohrab took in their attentions just as easily as he had once taken his mother's milk.

He would not stay at their side for long, though. By the age of seven Sohrab was already the acknowledged leader of the pack of neighborhood boys who wiled away the afternoons in the alleys riding bicycles and shooting homemade slings. By eleven he had the run of the whole city and would often linger in the streets or the *qaveh khaneh*, coffeehouse, where men recited the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi's eleventh-century verse epic, for one another. Sohrab would linger in the city long after school ended,

leaving his mother to curse her fate and pray, hour after hour, for his safe return.

As a young man of twenty Sohrab had somehow secured a high post in Iran's national textile bureau. No one quite knew how this had happened. He had neither money nor connections, and it was a job for which he had no qualifications besides his charm and his taste for finery, but these had proved sufficient. On their way to Europe and America, many of the country's most opulent carpets passed under his hands and exacting eye and could be shipped off only with his consent. His salary was generous by standards of the day, but to satisfy his luxurious tastes he supplemented his income with gambling, a favorite diversion since his teenage years. Within a few years of his marriage to Kobra, Sohrab had done well enough to dress in perfectly tailored Western suits, then still rare in Iran, and also to drive a black Chrysler of which he was no less vain than of his own brilliantined hair.

It was no secret that even after he married Kobra my grandfather's eyes still lingered on the smartly dressed ladies who had recently begun to appear on the streets of Tehran. It was also a fact known to many that for several years before his marriage Sohrab had courted a lady so chic and lovely it was said she could pass for an *aroos farangi*, a European's wife. But this woman, Simin, was twice divorced and unable to bear children; Sohrab knew that until he produced heirs to his family name, he could never marry her. So when his friend Ali-Ahmad had offered Sohrab his sister, whom he'd once seen at Ali-Ahmad's house and still remembered as a plump and pretty girl, Sohrab had not thought long before saying yes and bringing her to live in Khanoom's house on Avenue Moniriyeh.

Sohrab's sisters and three stepmothers took Kobra in with smiles and compliments. "Look at her pretty hands!" gushed one. "And her lovely eyes!" added another. She was given her own small room in Khanoom's house, and in her first months there Kobra sewed herself a quilt and embroidered a cloth on which she set her prayer shawl and rosary and also her hand mirror and hairbrush. All day she worked in Khanoom's kitchen, cleaning and chopping herbs for the *sabzi*, picking pebbles from the rice, and tending the grains over a charcoal brazier. At night she went to her room to wait for Sohrab. In the first years of their marriage, he came to her a few times a week, and it wasn't long before a baby appeared in a basket by her feet in the kitchen, and her breasts and belly were still swollen when two months later a second child began to grow in her.

They were her pride. As a boy Nader was especially prized by the family, but Lili was a beautiful child, plump and rosy cheeked, with sparkling black eyes, dimples, and an exquisitely tiny nose. The neighborhood women cooed and fussed over her whenever they dropped by the house on Avenue Moniriyeh. Even Sohrab, little given to children as he usually was, seemed charmed by her.

Kobra loved the courtyard of Khanoom's house and the deep blue tiles of the *hoz*, the shallow pool that stood there in the shade of a large persimmon tree. Khanoom's persimmon tree was also a favorite of the neighborhood birds, who would gather to feast on the fallen fruit under its branches. While her children napped in the afternoons, Kobra would steal away from her work to sit on the edge of the *hoz* and watch the birds as they pecked greedily at the seeds embedded in the fruit's rotting flesh.

In the years leading to the 1941 Allied invasion of Iran, when Soviet soldiers commandeered the northern provinces and British soldiers roamed the capital and controlled the oil fields to the south, the bread at Khanoom's house was often dotted with pebbles and

splinters and the stews they ate were only rarely prepared with meat. Sitting under the persimmon tree one afternoon in late fall, Kobra was cracking the shells of sunflower seeds between her teeth when she suddenly had an idea. She dusted the seeds from her skirt and went back into the house. She returned with a large wicker basket, which she set at the base of the persimmon tree. She scattered a fistful of sunflower seeds under the tree and then she held her breath and she waited.

She trapped five small brown birds the first day, and Khanoom clapped her hands in surprise, smiled with genuine pleasure, and praised Kobra's cleverness.

As a child of three, her daughter (and my own mother), Lili, would sometimes come across Kobra hunting birds in the courtyard. A sly smile would spread across Kobra's face as the creature's wings fluttered between her fingers. Later when Lili took her place on the floor of Khanoom's parlor for supper, she'd find a stew set out with bones so tiny and thin they were eaten along with the meat and she would cry and refuse to take a single bite, even though she knew there would be nothing else.

Most nights Sohrab went out with his friends to parties where the ladies were very slender and wore Western dresses and were much more beautiful than Kobra. When she asked to go with him, he told her she looked old and slovenly in her chador and that he would be embarrassed to take her along. She offered to go without her veil or even a simple head scarf, even though this would have made her barely less uncomfortable than roaming the streets naked. Still he went out alone.

Every night after putting her children to bed, she sat cross-legged in her room, propped her mirror against the wall, and set a candle on the floor beside it. She lined her eyes with a stick of *sormeh*, eyeliner, first outside and then

inside along their rims, and then she darkened her mole with its tip. She swiveled up her only tube of lipstick, dragged its crimson grease along her lips, and next blotted her fingers with lipstick and set about rouging her cheeks. She dabbed rose water behind her ears and between the cleft of her breasts, and then she sat peering at herself in her mirror until at last she heard the brass knocker crash against the door.

He always returned well after midnight, his impeccable suits and silk cravats scented by liquor, cigarettes, and the perfumes of other women. Kobra would ask him why he'd come home so late, saying his dinner had grown cold and she had been so worried, and if he answered at all, it would be to tell her that it was none of her business and why did she stay awake at all if it was only to annoy him? But if she ever fell asleep before his late-night arrivals and therefore failed to open the door for him after a second or third banging of the knocker, he would storm into the house and strike her, demanding to know where she had been and why she had not come at once, as any decent wife ought. Lili and her brother, Nader, often woke to the sounds of shouting and crying, and if they left their rooms and came forward Sohrab would beat them, too, though sometimes he would only raise a hand to strike them and stop just before it came crashing onto their heads.

"*Besooz-o-besaz*," Kobra would have been enjoined if she'd sought out anyone's advice. Burn inwardly and accommodate; burn inwardly and accommodate. But Kobra sought no one's advice. Too ashamed to confide her suffering to her family and too proud to unburden herself to her in-laws, Kobra lifted her eyes and her palms to the sky and confided only in God.

In spring and in summer Sohrab left for months at a time for the cooler provinces. In Karaj or Hamadan he and his friends would recline on carpets thrown across a riverbank, passing around a gold-trimmed *qalyoon* (water

pipe) and drinking *araq*, a Persian vodka, late into the night. One year he rented a cottage in the foothills of the Alborz Mountains, and toward the end of the summer he sent for Lili to spend a week with him there. She had never spent such a long stretch of time with her father, and it was difficult for her to reconcile the smiling, easygoing gentleman in the countryside with the fierce, formal patriarch she knew at home. Even his clothes were different. Here he wore cream-colored linen slacks and during the hottest parts of the day he rolled up his sleeves and undid the top buttons of his shirt as well, habits unheard of in the city. There were many pretty women about the cottage, but to Lili none seemed prettier than the fair, blue-eyed lady who linked her arm in Sohrab's and whispered in his ear as they walked together in the garden.

Since she was the only child among the party, Lili idled away the hours outside. What she liked especially was to pluck fruits from the trees—mulberries, sour cherries, and plums—and to hoard them in her pockets so that whenever Sohrab took her in his lap and stroked her hair she could present them to him like treasures. And in the mornings, when her father and his guests were still asleep, she helped the servants set honeydews and watermelons in the crook of the stream that ran behind the cottage.

The fruits would be left to cool in the water all day, and when Lili returned to retrieve them at dusk she'd find the women bathing together there in the stream. Beech trees lined the banks and their leaves shone like silver when the wind tousled them and they caught the last of the sunlight. Because the stream was shallow and the stones of its bed were flat and smooth, she could wade out to the center all by herself, but sometimes the current twisted her skirt around her legs and sent her tumbling. The woman with the blue eyes bathed in the river, too, but there was always a female servant to dip a pitcher into the water for her and pour it over her lovely shoulders and her long black hair,

and when she caught Lili watching her she seemed neither surprised nor disturbed by such wide-eyed attentions.

The following spring Sohrab and his cohorts journeyed across the border to Iraq, where he indulged his hosts by consenting to have a portrait taken of himself wearing an Arab headdress. Lili wished desperately that he'd take her with him. He would not consider it, but he promised to bring her back a gift, and so when he changed trains in Ahvaz he stopped at a flower stall and bought a bunch of narcissus flowers, their buds still tight and not yet fully fragrant, and he gave them to Lili when he returned to Tehran.

Kobra had spent the spring of Sohrab's trip to Iraq burning and accommodating, burning and accommodating. One day she went down to the basement of Khanoom's house where all the sacks of grain and flour were kept. As Kobra bent down and reached for a bag of rice, a large black scorpion raised its stinger and plunged it into the heel of her hand. She cried out at once, but before one of Sohrab's sisters could reach her the poison was already coursing through her blood, hot as fire. Her arm tingled and went numb, and she was sure that she would die.

But Khanoom, a seventh-generation *Tehrooni* with an intimate knowledge of the city's thousand perils, knew the cure. She hunted down the scorpion in the basement and killed it with one whack of her garden shovel. That night Kobra was put to bed with her hand facing up toward the ceiling and the dead scorpion bandaged to the site of its sting. The creature's legs, still stiff, dangled from her wrist.

"The sting of a scorpion comes not from ill will, but from its nature," Khanoom counseled, by way of soothing Kobra.

Kobra did not sleep that night, not a minute. She sat bolt upright hour after hour, drenched in her own sweat, crying for her mother and unable to look away from her hand, but by morning her fever began to break and slowly she understood that she would survive.

Although it was my grandmother Kobra who prayed five times a day, taking care each time to fold her prayer mat and veil into neat squares afterward, in the end it was Sohrab who found deliverance from his marital woes. In the ordinary course of his days, Sohrab had little use for the rituals of faith, but his religion extended him several important privileges then in place for men, one of which would prove especially useful: he could divorce his wife without documents or witnesses. To free himself of Kobra, he had only to speak his desire.

The argument started like any other of their arguments. He'd come home late from a party. In the circles in which he then moved, it had lately become fashionable to take a puff of opium with liquor, a combination that had brought him home even more bleary-eyed and unsteady on his feet than usual. The old curses and recriminations flashed between them, though this time he didn't strike her with his open hand but instead made a fist. He struck her just once this way, but even in his state he managed to do it with such perfection that the room went black and she fell to the floor. When Kobra opened her eyes it was to the sight of her own blood, streaming so profusely onto the tiled floors that it had formed a small pool beside her.

She left the house on Avenue Moniriyeh with nothing that night—not a single coin—and no clothes but the nightgown she was wearing and the veil she drew around her to hide her bloodied and swollen face. The next morning she would awake in her mother's bedroom to find that the flesh of her nose had collapsed and spread across the middle of her face. The local bonesetter could do no more for Kobra than slice out the crushed bones from her face and bind her nose with gauze to quell the blood, and you might have said (as many did) that from then on her honey-colored eyes were wasted on her.

"Who can understand the ways of God?" Kobra's aunt remarked coolly. "It is her *qesmat*, destiny."