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In the Middle of Many Mountains

I WANT TO TELL YOU THE STORY OF MY MOTHER'S DEATH, but I'm not sure we're ready. The story begins far away, in Nayriz, a city in the middle of many mountains that my mother always said was similar in appearance and climate to Tucson, Arizona. I've never been to Nayriz or Tucson. My mother always said that in Nayriz when it was summer, the heat burned everything it touched and everything touched burned like the heat. Seems reasonable enough.

HOME NOW, AFTER A LONG WHILE. I drive up—see my house, my mother, not directly but through the infrared of my stars. Heat is in the kitchen and heat is in my mother's broken eyes. Young holly trees at the head of the driveway bend under the weight of berries. Bark peeling off, soft to the touch. My mother's skin feels just so, and as I hug her, I count her vertebrae, tickling her spine to make sure she will not die in my arms.

The sprinkler sprays us as we move towards the house. The sky is murky.

Remember: astronomy, my stars are left alone, left behind. The IRT is of no use here. Science will not tell the story, my younger teenage sister's almost-death which is my mother's death.

My sister, she wouldn't eat. And now she has run away like a child. I'll try to tell you more.

THE SEARCH FOR MY SISTER BEGINS with a large midday meal that might put you to sleep. *Lubia polow*. Green beans, tomatoes, and chicken with rice. Seasoned with cinnamon. *Khoresh-e qeymeh*. Split yellow chickpeas, tomatoes, and fried potato strips on top. Seasoned with turmeric. *Kalam polow*. Cabbage, onions, lentil beans, and small meatballs with rice. Seasoned with cumin and turmeric. *Lozeh badam*. Peeled and ground almonds, sugar and rose water. Seasoned with cardamom. Blended into a sweet mixture, then shaped like stars. When she was younger, my mother's mother used to tell her not to eat too many candies because eating stars, like wishing on them, was dangerous.

My mother has laid out the table in such splendor, but she has to squint at silverware before we begin. And we must begin before we can find my sister.

MY SISTER RAN AWAY A FEW DAYS AGO. She just graduated high school.

My mother thinks Marjan ran away because our father left in December. This might be so. I wonder if Marjan is truly upset or if she is angry because there is no battle over her. Maybe my sister wishes she were younger so there would be something at stake: her whole life. So people couldn't say, *At least the girls were grown up when it happened.*

When my mother called last week, I promised my mother I would find Marjan.

"EAT MORE," my mother says.

"We should talk," I say, thinking of Marjan.

"No, eat more."

My mother eats with her face close to the plate. Behind her on the wall, a still-life of African violets, hanging crookedly. On the table, brass candelabras, candles unlit.

MY MOTHER LIVED A REALLY LONG TIME. Too long, and in the end, she was blind and talking like Tiresias. She said, "Your father wasn't really your father" and "You don't know your family." But this isn't the right beginning.

AFTER EATING, I CALL MARJAN AND LEAVE a message telling her that Mother is wasting her eyes on crying. I search Marjan's room. Under the bed, I find an ankle bracelet with letters strung together: *Summer Fun*. In the back of her nightstand drawer, I find a poem about snakes in desert sand. On the bookshelf, all of my father's books. Taped to the back of her standing mirror, I find our father's wedding ring. On the wall, there is a framed star chart of the Northern Hemisphere that I gave her for her sixteenth birthday.

I'LL HAVE TO TELL YOU ABOUT MY AMERICAN FATHER LEAVING my mother for an intellectual companion. A woman whose hair wasn't so dark as my mother's, who knew more than stories and could navigate metaphysical questions, the notion of your father not being your father or of your love not being your love.

During the Christmas holiday weekend, he told my mother he was leaving. I hid in the kitchen, filled with real Persian stews and frozen American pies, apple and pumpkin. My mother loves the frozen American pies.

My father avoided all intellectual language, and in fact, spoke to my mother the way he'd been speaking to her for the past twenty-five years, like a child who didn't understand.

"This isn't working," he said, gesturing at the entire living room, the house. "This isn't working. Not working."

But my mother was an adult who didn't quite understand English, a difference that should have been honored.

After he left, I went into the living room with a piece of pumpkin pie for my mother. Her favorite.

She didn't cry. She looked at me and said, "I can't tell my mother. She's too old to handle this."

Later that week, my father called to say that we could get rid of all of his stuff. He surprised us by leaving all of his books. *The Divine Comedy*. The stars are not so holy. A wheel turned evenly? This isn't my universe.

I went through most of the books, poking holes through the parched pages with my fingernails. A soft clicking sound, a book gnawed upon. So easy to destroy old things.

Marjan yelled when she saw what I'd done to the books. She took them, all of them.

My mother was brave. She didn't cry about the divorce for almost one year. That's why her eyes went bad. Go ahead, look directly at the sun.

MARJAN IS AT THE MOTEL 6 on Cheatham St. I find her there, eating cheese and crackers.

"I can't take care of her," my sister says.

"I don't understand," I say. "You can leave."

"I can't," she says. "He made that impossible. She'll be all alone. She won't have anyone to talk to."

The room smells like bleach, and my sister, she doesn't smell at all. She is a dark-haired, dark-skinned girl who looks like my mother. Marjan sits Indian style with crumbs all around. There will be some proof that she was here.

"I need you to help me," Marjan says, "but you're not going to like it. You won't want to hear."

I don't want to see. Her, barely there, five-year-old limbs stretched out to form an adult. We are always playing with dolls. If I listen to her, will I go blind?

AND MAYBE THIS IS HOW the story begins—in Farsi, a language I don't quite understand. *Jan* for “dear,” *khub* for “good,” *bala* for “yes,” *che* for “what.” And *zahr-e-mar*, “poison of the snake.” Who is the betrayer?

AT HOME, MY MOTHER WANTS TO KNOW where I've been, and I tell her that I had to go see about a star, a brown dwarf that my colleagues located. My mother says that it sounds like a fairytale. She asks me which American fairytale has dwarfs in it.

For the afternoon, we sit outside on the deck to work with the pomegranates. We're making more food for tonight—in case Marjan comes home. We should all eat together.

I hold a bowl for the fleshy seeds. On the ground, we have a plastic bag for the skin and hollowed pith. She is showing me how to make one of my favorite stews. My mother insists she must teach me how to remove the seeds completely from the pith because the pith is bitter. No art is involved in removing the seeds. I don't really need a lesson.

The oak tree. I sit in its shade, but my mother stands in the summer sun. Perhaps the sun doesn't bother her so much anymore. She stands in front of me. The pomegranate juice sprays into my eyes and onto my clothes. She laughs at me because she knew that this would happen. My mother warned me before we started, and I took her advice—wear old clothes and wipe the juice out of my eyes quickly. I never received the usual motherly advice. In elementary school, my classmates had sun-staring contests during recess. I always won. At a price, I'm sure.

My mother moves closer to read my old t-shirt. “Is that a beer bottle on your shirt?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. I almost tell her that it belonged to someone else, that the shirt was free, that beer helps me sleep. Lies are a habit, but I'm too old for all of this.

“Oh,” she says, “I need you to write a letter for me. Perry Ellis didn't refund all of my money for the perfume.”

Beer, perfume. We should get rid of the indulgences. Is that the connection? Or is it simpler? Bottles. Perhaps, it's even simpler.

“Be careful,” my mother says, as she gets sprayed. She laughs, and the wind carries that music upwards with the heat. The deck is stained with blood.

End of excerpt. For the full text, please see our print issue.