

Martyrdom Street

Buildings. Everywhere you look, there are buildings. On Inqilab Avenue two solitary walls stand upright on the left side of the road. It's anybody's guess what this pile of rubble will turn out to be. Maybe the government has commissioned a mosque, a business center, or a mall. Or better yet, a monument honoring the dead. The drilling sounds subside as I move beyond the construction zone. Ali Agha, the baker, spits out orange seeds on the cracked cement as he counts some change in his hand. Come to think of it, even his store is a new addition to the street.

"What time is it?" Ali Agha asks a worker as he observes the pedestrians on the opposite corner. The worker tells him the time from inside the bread shop. "It's slow again today," he says, mostly to himself. When he recognizes a customer, Ali Agha motions to his cronies to bring out the sheets of warm *lavash*. "Hurry up! Hurry up!" he yells, now sitting erect on the edge of his chair. As the customer approaches, Ali Agha holds out the bread and says, "Fresh out of the oven. Don't you want to take some home to your wife?" The pedestrian lowers his head, quickly walking away, and Ali Agha curses at a young employee before eating the bread himself. "How am I supposed to run a business?" he complains. "What's their excuse now? The war has long been over."

As I walk past the bread shop, Ali Agha notices me, and the scene repeats itself. "I was waiting for you," he says, rising from his chair. "Some bread, *Haji Khanum*?" I don't fault Ali Agha for his sycophantic manners. He smiles. He calls me "*Haji Khanum*." He politely holds out the bread. The economy is hard on everybody these days.

"Six sheets of *lavash*," I say.

When I hand him the change, Ali Agha takes my good hand and kisses it. "God bless you!" he exclaims, following up the blessing with a token prayer, but I quickly pull my hand away. Ali Agha apologizes, and I walk away quickly. So quickly that I don't realize I've walked past the post office. I wipe my good hand against my Islamic attire, rubbing it hard into the cloth until I see a spot of blood. I know then that I've atoned for the sin. It's un-Islamic to touch a man's hand. These are the fine points we learned in school; fine points about nails and skin and hair and water and dirt and cotton and wood. Where religion is concerned, there's always something new to learn.

I pass Ali Agha's bread shop every Tuesday en route to the downtown post office. Since the explosion, I've had a lot of free time on my hands, so I create mindless chores for myself. I feed the pigeons. I water the gardens. Or I visit the post office. Nowadays, the post office certifies all our letters and packages. Letters with pictures in them or letters with little substance. Perfunctory letters about the weather or the new ice-cream store down the block. My daughter, Nasrin, lives in America, but she probably can't read Persian anymore, so why waste time crafting a masterpiece? Still, I prefer descriptive missives myself. Long letters about winter nights in cold gardens, but Nasrin rarely writes back. When she makes the effort, it hardly seems worth the trouble. Her last one arrived three months ago. I've memorized its notable passages: "Hamid looks like Husni Mubarak. I think it's the nose." Hamid is her fiancé. Then she adds, "Are you still praying, Maman?" I'll keep her letter in my purse until the next one arrives.

Today, I take the long route to the post office: through the bazaar and past Muhsin's engineering building. I haven't been to this part of town since the last months of the war . . . has it already been a year?

Anyhow. That day, too, I stopped by the bazaar. I wanted a merchant there to price some of our family antiques. They were for Nasrin, and I thought she might want them someday for her home. I don't know what I was thinking, since leaving Iran wasn't an imminent pos-

sibility back then, with the war dragging on, no end in sight. But in a state of war, denying reality comes more easily than embracing the truth. So I asked the merchant if he'd be willing to smuggle out the antiques for a modest bribe. He just rolled his eyes and sighed.

Disappointed, I left the bazaar for the post office. A long line curved around the outside of the building, but, compared to the gasoline lines, this one moved swiftly. As I walked in, the mosque projected the noontime prayer call, the *azan*, which echoed in the neighborhood, and a young woman behind me silently mouthed her prayers. Outside, military planes flew low, circling the neighborhood; only the *azan* muffled their distant drone. When the prayer call finally ended, the young woman started speaking softly to me. "They recruited my youngest son for the war," she said. "He's twelve. Do you have a son?"

I shook my head.

Then she whispered, "I don't believe in martyrdom."

Before I could respond, an altercation broke out between two customers standing ahead of us in line. "It's my turn," a bearded middle-aged man declared as he elbowed a *chadori* woman half his size to claim a spot in front of the post-office clerk.

"What do you mean?" the woman challenged. "I've been waiting for twenty minutes." As she was speaking, the woman adjusted her black veil to hide loose strands of hair. Then, she turned to the person behind her to say, "Didn't you see him just walk in the door?" But no one rushed to support her. Maybe it was the desperation in her voice, the hypocrisy of her wearing a *chador*, or the assumption of the weakness of her gender that made her appear guilty. Even though the woman was telling the truth, she appeared less sincere than the man.

The post-office clerk intervened to resolve the situation. "Khanum," he said to the *chador*-clad woman, "please cooperate. Let this man finish his business. You'll be next." Before the woman could voice another complaint, there was a loud thud. It was a noise I'd never heard

before—as if twenty trucks had crashed into one another. From a distance the red-alert signals, which sounded like truncated ambulance sirens, began to toll. The Iraqis had struck something, but nobody seemed to know what.

Helicopters had joined the military planes to survey the streets. Inside, no one dared speak, except for the post-office clerks, who shouted orders to file people out of the building. “Over here,” a young man yelled, and we formed a line behind him. Another loud crash shook the main lobby, and the concrete beneath our feet began to tremble. The young woman standing behind me again prayed silently as she watched a rat scuttle across the floor. Before the rat reached the western end of the lobby, the tiles trembled, and we flew out of the building.



That’s all I remember about that Tuesday afternoon. I’m not even sure if the ground was really shaking after the third blast, or whether my knees were betraying me. I’m not sure. Everything happened quickly, maybe within five minutes.



An old man sits in a wheelchair outside the post-office entrance—a spot he’s claimed since the war. I place the warm sheets of *lavash* in his lap and step into the building. He mumbles some incoherent words, and I turn around to acknowledge his disjointed utterances, but I know his memory will only register the incident for a few short minutes. As I wait in line, two teenage boys push ahead of me, but I don’t see any point in fighting such aggression. Moralizing won’t persuade them to change their habits.

When the post-office clerk finally registers my letter, I step outside

and walk a short distance. The man in the wheelchair has managed to roll himself a block farther, and when I approach him, he doesn't recognize me. He reaches out for change, and I place a fifty-toman bill in his lap. At the first green light I catch a bus, and from the window I observe other reconstruction projects throughout the city.

The government rebuilt the post office six months ago. A businessman who'd lost a son in the war donated large sums of money to renovate the building. For days, construction workers toiled to efface all remnants of the explosion, burying broken bones and torn clothing under the ground. Still, despite its bright clean walls, fragrant household plants, and new faces, this building doesn't differ much from the old one.

Only scattered ruins in the southern corners of the city linger as icons of the war. A chipped wall, a shattered window, a cripple. Where rocks and gravel once covered the streets, new monuments stand in their places. Outside the main drive leading to the post office, schoolchildren gather regularly to water fresh flowers. On that street, Martyrdom Street, where tulips bloom perennially, only the murmurs of the dead keep their memories alive.



I decide to take a detour and step off the bus to visit the Imam's tomb. Despite the summer drought, a gardener lavishly waters a fresh flower patch next to the sanctuary, but no one seems to mind. In the courtyard a mother rocks her newborn son and hums a gentle lullaby. The baby stares into the distance, through the massive columns and their plaster moldings. When the humming stops and the preacher's voice rises, the infant shifts in his mother's arms and wails.

"Maybe he's hungry," someone remarks.

"Or tired," another surmises.

"Here, *Khanum*, have some bread and cheese."

I go inside the shrine and walk toward the *Imam's* tomb. The smell of rosewater permeates the hand-woven rugs on the floor. Next to me, a woman wails and kisses the iron grids that protect the tomb, asking for miracles. I try hard to imitate her piety but can't. Her crying makes me nervous, and I decide to leave. Outside, a security guard approaches and removes his shoes by the entrance to the tomb. Today, he's only an ornament here. He doesn't see the young girl and teenage boy flirt while sharing a bowl of pistachios. The girl's veil slowly slides down her head, exposing thick black curls, but nobody chastizes her. The price of bread went up another ten tomans; the price of gasoline another five.

I catch the next bus and go home. There's nothing more to see here. The twenty-second of *Bahman* has become just another meaningless national holiday, like the commemorations of *Imams* or the birthdays of kings. My hand has started to ache, so I take some pills and wait for today to spill into tomorrow. Muhsin is gone and won't return for hours. I won't remember him coming home.



The sky is still black, but morning lies just around the corner. Outside, the trees and crickets hide from view, conspiring to delay the arrival of dawn. I open the bedroom window and listen to their movements. I don't know how Muhsin lives with his other wife—where he sleeps, whether he leaves the window open or shut—but I don't speculate. This is my preferred hour of the day, when the streets are quiet and I can watch Muhsin dream. He doesn't feel me stroke his fingers.

From the bedside window, rays of light slowly penetrate the bedroom. I place my prayer rug in the middle of the room and begin the *namaz*. The obligatory prayers are brief, but I linger minutes longer to think. Last week, I found the opium stashed away in Muhsin's coat pocket but feigned ignorance. It's easier to keep up the pretense.

As I put away my prayer rug, Muhsin wakes up prematurely from his sleep. His forehead is covered in sweat and he throws the blanket off his body.

"It was hot," he says. "I felt like I was on fire."

"But the window is open," I say.

"I don't know. I was sweating uncontrollably."

"Where were you?" I ask.

"I'm not too sure. Near the *Takht-i Jamshid*. Under the rubble."

"It was only a dream," I assure him.

But he remains agitated and confused.

"Is the radio on?"

"No," I say. "It's early. Go back to sleep."

The samovar brews slowly in the kitchen. I set the breakfast plates and some *lavash* on the table. Muhsin joins me shortly with a cigarette in his hand. He appears more at ease, no doubt relieved to put the night behind him. Since my accident, his nightmares have become more frequent, but we don't always know what causes them.

Muhsin walks over to the counter to turn up the volume on the radio. When the announcer initiates a litany of doleful Arabic prayers, he reaches for an old newspaper on the kitchen table. "Nobody cares about the news anymore. All we hear these days are Arabic prayers. What's the matter with Persian? I bet they're afraid people might actually understand the nonsense they're promoting."

"They're just harmless prayers," I say. "Why make such a fuss?"

I place a cup of tea in front of him. Muhsin smirks at me but doesn't respond. Instead, he fiddles with the short-wave stations until he locates the BBC. Then he relaxes his forehead and continues eating his breakfast. "Much better," he comments, listening attentively to the news summaries, even though there's nothing noteworthy going on in the world. When the news hour is over, Muhsin goes into the bedroom to change. He yells to me from there and presses me to finish the cleaning quickly. I pretend not to hear him and sing to my-

self, louder and louder, until he's forced to repeat himself. Then he marches back into the kitchen and threateningly hovers over me.

"What?" I ask.

Muhsin pauses. He moves back slightly and starts drying the dishes.

"Nothing," he says. "I just don't us want to be late."



What is it about the air of guilt—the self-conscious twitches, the wandering eyes, and the cautious humor—that invariably gives the guilty away?

With Muhsin, it started with the smell of his cigarettes. Just before my accident, I noticed that his cigarettes no longer released the crisp aroma of fine tobacco. This was the smell of infirmity, the stench of tobacco grown on diseased lands. Maybe Iraqi shelling had damaged the yearly crop, transferring rare viruses from decaying human flesh onto idle land. Or maybe poor manufacturing had stained the tobacco leaves with unwelcome impurities. Pesticides. Fossil fuels. Chemical gas. Whenever Muhsin lit a cigarette, a grayish brown smoke stretched out sideways, and like a sick cat, he coughed endlessly and uncontrollably.

On that sunny afternoon when the post office was bombed, Muhsin had planned to spend the day working at his engineering firm. This line of work had irregular hours. Sometimes, during the week, Muhsin would be gone all morning; other times he wouldn't even leave the house. I watched him leave the house with his cigarettes and fake leather briefcase.

When the bombing threw me onto the concrete, I lay still, thinking of Muhsin. Random scenes passed before my eyes, and I could feel his presence. We were both downtown, maybe just a few streets away from each other. On a map of Tehran the distance between us

measured less than the width of two fingers. I wondered whether Muhsin could hear me if I called out his name. Once or twice, I opened my mouth, but there was nothing. Tall flames spilled out of the sky, and I had difficulty focusing. I was slipping out of consciousness.

During my subsequent phase of alertness I smelled death. A young man lay beside me, breathing with prodigious effort, until he decided, quite abruptly, that life was no longer worth it. That was when I became aware of him—of his separated limb and gory perspiration. Dismembered from the rest of him, the man's hand had landed next to my feet. His was a beautiful hand with long artistic fingers and unmanicured nails, a hand capable of painting masterpieces or composing epics. He saw me admire his detached appendage and smiled vaguely. Just at that second, before he decided to surrender his body, his eyes caught mine. They seemed to tell me, "Take it, if that's what you want. It belongs to you now." I've often wondered about him and that hand.

A rescue worker draped a white sheet over his corpse and severed parts when the young man shut his eyes. I shifted slightly as the rescuer's shoes brushed against my side. Then the rescuer placed two fingers on my throat and yelled to his fellow workers, "This one's alive." Two helpers crossed the street and rushed to lift my body onto a wooden stretcher. "Does it hurt?" one of them asked, as he placed me inside the ambulance. It was his question that reminded me of the sensation I'd lost in my left hand.

A female attendant nurse rubbed an acrid liquid under my nose as the engine started. "Breathe," she said, gently caressing my face. When my inhalations grew regular, the woman raised my head to cover it with a veil. As she fastened the ends of the black fabric into a loose knot, she pledged, "Have faith, sister. We'll win the war," but her assistant just bandaged my hand and sneered. What did faith have to do with war?

Someone tried calling Muhsin at the office when we reached the hospital. Nothing major, they had claimed, which was true—just a deep wound in my left hand. As the doctor explained, though the hand was never going to move well, in fact it would hardly move at all, it was still there, almost in full, attached to the rest of me. “All four fingers and nails,” he affirmed, as if there were nothing unusual about the number. He wrapped the gauze tightly around my hand as I glanced at the lifeless burden on the left side of my body.

Eventually, the nurse wheeled me into another room, away from the other victims of the explosion. She asked again if there was anyone else I wanted to call. “My husband,” I repeated. Within minutes she returned to inform me that Muhsin still wasn’t around. I suspected nothing. I knew he would come to me in time. Instead, I thought about my hand, about life with one functional hand instead of two. How much could that change a person’s life? I could still dust, chop, caress. And Nasrin. How would she take it? It didn’t matter then. I wouldn’t be seeing her for a while.

When Muhsin finally appeared, he entered my hospital room without knocking. “Why did you go *there*?” he demanded in an accusatory tone, as though going to the post office carried the same implications as marching onto a battlefield. I didn’t answer. The nurse had given me an injection, and my head grew heavy. I don’t remember his leaving for the night. The next day Muhsin came in just as the nurse was changing the dressing on my wounds. He looked away as he spoke, focusing on the door instead of my hand. Evidently, the explosion had started a massive migration out of Tehran. When the nurse finished bandaging my hand, Muhsin rolled a television set into my room so I could watch for myself. As they aired scenes from the explosion, I looked for glimpses of the young man lying beside me, but the reporter had moved on to another newsworthy event: a Tunisian caravan gone astray on the road to Damascus.

“You hear that?” I asked Muhsin.

He looked pale.

"I'm sorry," he said, putting his fingers through his greasy hair.

"Don't tell Nasrin."

"Okay," he said. "But what were you doing there?"

"Mailing her a letter."

As he spoke to me, Muhsin caressed my good hand, even though public displays of affection—even between married couples—were against the Islamic rules of the state-run hospital. I wanted him to stop but said nothing. Then, in one ugly second, I began to yank his hand, hoping to pull it out of socket as if it were an appendage on a doll. I yanked and yanked until Muhsin eventually shook me hard and told me to stop. Then he lit a cigarette and the smell of infirmity suffused the room. His eyes drifted away from my face and onto the white tiles beneath his feet.

"I was at work," he said quickly. "On site. It was Tuesday, remember?"

"Nasrin used to count tiles," I said.

"I came as soon as I heard."

"I guess she learned that from you."

As Muhsin reached for the pitcher to pour himself some water, his hands shook and he spilled the water on the floor. The second time he tried, the glass slipped out of his hands. Never before had an incident so alienated us. Not the revolution, the drugs, nor even Muhsin's short stays in prison, because none of it seemed as indelible as this. The knowledge of something good turned putrid bothered us, and my crippled hand displayed publicly the imperfection of our lives.

I knew then.

"Why you?" he whispered.

I felt him grope for my anger, but this time there was nothing. One who has lain next to death begins to hold onto life, however feebly.

"It's still in my purse," I told him.

"What?"

"The letter."

"I'll mail it myself," he offered, "and give some money to the poor."

"Please," I said. "Please take care of it."

"I will," he promised.

He never did.



Weeks later, I returned to the hospital to have the bandages removed from my hand. This time, Muhsin accompanied me throughout the ordeal, valiantly, as if instructed beforehand by the doctor. He didn't even cringe when he saw for the first time my twisted fingers and bent knuckles. I did. I wanted to rip my hand away, like a chicken bone, and dump it into a garbage bin, permanently out of sight.

"Try massaging it several times a day," the doctor said. "Soon you'll regain some feeling." He began rubbing my hand in soft vertical strokes and waited for me to take over. But when he released my hand, I let it drop to my side and instead watched a stray cat limp to the other side of the street from his office window. The doctor paused. "Like this," he offered again, taking my hand and exerting pressure upon it. He waited for me to imitate his motions, but without his encouragement the hand again fell to my side.

On the way out the doctor gave Muhsin a bag full of color-coded tubes. "This one numbs the pain; this one will heal the remaining cuts with minimal scarring; this one will . . ." I stopped listening to him, focusing only on the doctor's fourth finger. Would he have responded to his own pain in the same way that he reacted to the suffering of others?



The sun pierces the morning clouds as we drive to the doctor's office. Already, a long trail of outdated cars clogs the expressway. A driver to the left of us thrusts his head out the window to yell obscenities

at a wayward pedestrian. Farther ahead, two cars stall abruptly, choking on leaded fuel, before chugging along. The car's irregular motion and frequent jerky halts make me dizzy. As I open a window to clear my head, noxious fumes waft inside the automobile, and I feel worse. "Close the window," Muhsin says. "The air is really dirty in this part of the city."

The doctor's office appears shortly after we turn onto Martyrdom Street. Since we were last here, fresh slogans have been painted on the concrete walls of the doctor's building. Muhsin begins reading some of them out loud: "A veil protects a woman's decency and prevents moral corruption." He lets out a loud, devilish laugh, and continues: "Death to the unveiled."

"Was that ever in the Qu'ran?" he asks.

I don't reply. It's the absence of opium that makes Muhsin moody. We enter the doctor's office and the nurse situates us in the waiting room. Muhsin picks up an old magazine, skims it, and loudly tosses it back on the table. Then, the doctor appears and directs us to the examination room. We smile politely and thank him for making time for us despite the short notice.

"Are you still using the medication?" he asks.

I nod. "But they don't stop the pain any more," I say.

Muhsin lights a cigarette and looks at the doctor.

"Go ahead," the doctor says to him.

As he exhales, a ripple of smoke spreads out, and I smell sickness again. Muhsin walks over to the window as the doctor gives me an injection. Before leaving, we make an appointment for the following month, and Muhsin asks if there's anything else we can do—a superfluous question he always feels compelled to pose. There is, of course, nothing more to do, and soon we are back on the expressway.

At the first red light Muhsin reaches over and takes my hand. He kisses it from the fingertips to the center of the palm. "This point here looks like a bird's nest," he says, referring to the corner where the life

line and love line intersect. To me, the indentation looks more like a ditch.

"Don't go," I say.

Muhsin releases my hand, and his eyes wander from my wound to the window. I long to stare at him, into his eyes, but he twitches as the light turns green, and his eyes follow the morning traffic down Martyrdom Street and away from my sight.



A World Between

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by Iranian-Americans

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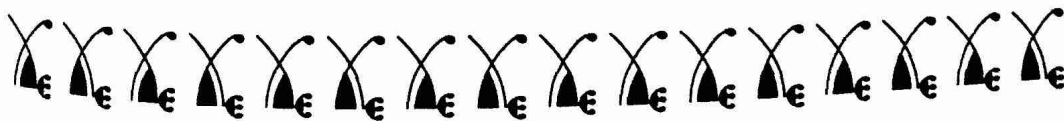
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