

In the Middle of Many Mountains

By Nahal Suzanne Jamir

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.

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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 *zah-re-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.

In Hawaii, life goes on without me. I have left my observatory, my stars behind. They continue to be born, in dust and particle cloud and muck of space—their red-hot secret safe from me. And the Universe expands until everything is old and its newness, its beginning, becomes a red that only I could see, if I were there.

I always tell my students that infrared astronomy is about seeing what the very young and the very old do not want you to see. We are caretakers, I tell them.

Before we were born, my father owned a telescope. On boring Michigan nights, he stargazed. He also imagined stories to go along with the lights that he saw in the sky. When we were kids, he told us these stories at night. He told us of a planet where creatures looked like gargoyles and built their castles on the side of sharp, smooth cliffs. A desert planet. He told us of another planet where creatures could be male or female or nothing. A winter planet. Later, I found his stories in books. The worst sort of lie.

We blend the pomegranate seeds, then strain the juice.

“You should tell me your recipes,” I say, “so I’ll know what to do when you stop cooking.”

“Whenever you come home, I’ll cook for you.” She refills the saltshaker.

“Besides, you don’t have the patience.”

“I do. I have a lot of patience.”

“Will you write that letter for me today?” she asks.

My mother just can’t wait for words. She has a professional way of speaking that she uses with me when she’s not tired, but she cannot write legibly or type. She is always

dictating to someone. When she dictated to my father, he changed her words entirely, made them excessively formal. I wonder if I have the patience to listen to her, to fix her words.

Marjan is sick with anorexia. The next time I visit her at the motel, she tells me how to save her. I insist on her coming home.

“No,” she says. “There’s too much food.”

The room is so neat. Today, the scent of lemon.

“I don’t want you to go,” I say.

“I have to,” she says, playing with the rubber bands on her wrist. “It’s the best facility, and my college money will cover it. It all makes sense.”

“You have to tell her.”

“No, don’t tell her anything,” Marjan says.

I cannot understand silence, but I know that I’ll go home and stuff my mouth with food.

The story ends with me crying as a grown woman. The one time my mother actually held me as a grownup. That one time, she held me, her body already small from her own grief. They say caffeine sucks calcium out of your bones. It’s much worse with sadness. And we waste away.

Don’t worry. There is an ending after this one.

My father fell in love quickly, I think. He left so quickly.

Right after, we rarely talked on the phone. About a month later, though, he came to visit me in Hawaii, with his new lover, but made me promise not to tell Marjan or my mother.

My father said to me, “I always think of things to tell you, but then I can’t remember.”

The truth, but I wished he would lie to me, too.

My sister has been institutionalized and my mother is going blind. My mother needs several substantial eye surgeries, so I’ve moved home to be with her. You see, my mother is afraid to be put to sleep, for she might never wake up.

I took a sabbatical from the University. I told them all that I would be back soon.

But I know I might never leave here.

Marjan was my secret first, then our secret. I had to tell her, you see.

“She doesn’t like my food anymore?” my mother asked.

“She’s just angry,” I said. “She needs to be alone.”

“Will you write a letter to her for me?”

And I did. I wrote Marjan two letters, one from me and one from my mother.

My father and I still talk once a week. I will not tell him where Marjan really is.

So, have I kept her secret?

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In November, a letter from my father arrives. I make my mother open it. The letter from my father reads as if from a stranger. The letter is formal. He declares his intention to marry again and be separated from my mother “in every respect.”

My mother reads the letter out loud to me with the pace and care of a child. I already knew this was the end.

She asks me what the letter means. “How is this different from what’s already going on? I thought we were divorced.”

“No,” I say, “you’re just separated. You have to sign papers to be legally divorced.”

The next morning before she goes in for surgery, she says, “I hope I die. It would serve him right.” She wipes her tears away. “And your sister.” But I’m not sure that my sister won’t die first.

When I was eight, my mother asked me to write her a letter to Belk’s. Her store credit card had appeared with her first name misspelled. She couldn’t have them change it unless they had a written and signed request. Usually, my father did this sort of chore. He was busy, though, and my mother knew I was old enough to compose a letter.

She wanted the letter to be polite. She dictated to me, emphasizing words that indicated humility and precursory appreciation. Instead, I relayed outrage. I claimed that in Persian culture to misspell someone’s name was tantamount to calling the person weak. I assured the managers of Belk’s that my mother was not weak. She would live forever and lay waste to their empire. And could they mail a new card within the next seven to ten business days?

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I say that my sister stopped eating because that's the common way of understanding anorexia. What it really means is that you don't love the people around you any more, and you punish yourself for it. This isn't weakness.

I knew it was happening. She came to visit me before it got bad, before she ran away from home. I should have known. She wanted frozen yogurt for lunch. She asked me to borrow clothes that were too big for her. She fell asleep at eight o'clock. She dreamt of mountains.

Marjan calls me a few times. She says, "I think snow is like the bark of our holly trees and like the places on T.V." She says, "I beat Mark in chess today. But he taught me how, so it doesn't count." She says, "If I die, put a picture of a constellation on my marker. Cassiopeia." She says, "I think you know me. I think I'm still the same." She says, "I miss you."

My father described movement in the poetry he wrote as a child. When he lived on the shore of Lake Michigan, he noted the patterns of the water's movement, how every few minutes you could expect an eighth-note rhythm to emerge. According to my father, the quickening was a watery joy, a jazz attack.

Later, he lived in Oklahoma, landlocked. Then, he described the clouds. To describe the sky, though, he didn't use music or art or love. He used scientific names for

cloud types—a sort of truth, I suppose. He wrote academic articles for his high school paper about cloud formations. Why can't my father look up with imagination?

I always tell my students that the Universe expanding is nothing to be afraid of. It means that we can see the secrets, the beginnings. There's a story there, I tell them, and it begins far away and ends here, with us.

I have been a bad daughter. It's so easy to be a bad daughter. You lose your grandmother's turquoise ring. Or you don't go to your cousin's wedding. Or you drink beer in front of your mother on Thanksgiving. Or you correct her grammar. Or you ignore your little sister's sickness.

To be a good daughter, you must eat your mother's cooking and ignore the long black hairs in the food. You must resist the instinct to gag. You must pick out the hair and never tell your mother that you found it. Tell her you love her food. *Can I have more?*

So easy to be a bad daughter. Fill up until your belly is ready to explode with the beginning of that story you're trying to tell.

My father's new love is American. She knows a lot of Persians, though, because she lives in Los Angeles. She claims to understand the culture. I don't understand the culture.

My father, I'm sure, fell in love with this woman's openness, something very different from my mother's culture, her secretive nature. Even as a child, I had to pry stories out of my mother. She viewed her homeland as a secret, not as something anyone

else should understand. My mother's brown skin always gave her away. But to my mother, this reveal was only an illusion. Her insides were much darker and much more different.

The secrets, my father couldn't stand them. During one of our conversations, he said, "I know she has nothing to hide, but it's her own belief that she does. I'm not a foolish American."

My mother always wanted me to marry a nice Persian boy.

When you go to the Mauna Kea Observatory, you must climb a sacred mountain. They say gods used to live here. You must observe rituals to respect the ancestors. You must do things right, *pono* in Hawaiian. I don't know the word in Farsi.

Marjan's mouth and eyes are dry. Her hair never left her. She has gained a lot of weight. I don't know why she started eating again.

"I feel like him," my sister says, "like I've got nothing, though I've spent my whole life building an altar."

"An altar to what?" I ask.

She has my mother's brown skin, and it shines against New York's winter-scape. "To everything," she says, both of her arms sweeping the view before us: Central Park, nothingness.

I put my arm around her, and she looks at me, confused. We aren't used to touching each other. "I'm hungry," I say, and lead her to a hot dog stand nearby.

We eat, for the sacrifice has already been made. The steam from the hot dog stand blows directly into our faces, thawing us. My sister asks me where we can find a goat, and we are okay. Happy for the joke.

My sister cannot smile anymore. Her muscles are gone, atrophied or just out of practice. She smiles with her eyes looking up at the sky, her hair blowing in the wind, her arm around me that firmly pulls me in like I am a child in need of warmth.

My father's new love is a dental hygienist. What is in peoples' mouths? Nothing. No words. Everyone is silent. Speaking English is like being mute. And I don't know Farsi. My father says one language is as good as another.

My mother's surgeries have gone well, and her eyesight is much improved. When I bring Marjan home, my mother can see her.

"I missed you," my mother says. And then she is crying, and Marjan is the one to console her. My mother will waste her new eyes with this crying. Marjan is crying now, too.

Still, we will eat.

When my mother was pregnant with Marjan, birds came very close to her. One bird in particular, a redbird, kept watch over her.

Then, the weather got colder, and the crows came. My mother was sitting outside one day. The birds surrounded her, and she couldn't see any light or feel the wind anymore. Only a moment. She swears in that time the crows stole my sister's soul.

This was one of our nighttime stories, one of our fairy tales. Marjan loved the story. She always said, “No, Mother, they were bringing my soul to my body” and ran around pretending to be a demon.

Marjan leaves for college, having permission to begin in the spring session. She wants to major in astronomy, be just like me. All I can wonder is when she’s coming home again. I’m afraid we’ve lost her again. I understand what it means to leave home now.

I have decided to stay home because my mother’s eyesight is failing again.

My mother and I make it through the mild winter.

In early spring, she and I are sitting outside on the deck. We suck the salt off pistachio shells, eat the nut, and then suck at our own teeth to make sure we’ve gotten all of the meat.

My mother looks closely at me. “I can see your freckles,” she says. I think she’s lying.

The University calls and asks me if I’ll be back in the fall. I tell them the story about Alfraganus, the astronomer Dante used almost exclusively to structure *The Divine Comedy*. Dante hardly ever mentions Alfraganus, but without the astronomer, *The Divine Comedy* wouldn’t exist. That is the story of Alfraganus.

I tell the University that I will tell my story. *The world isn’t big enough yet. I can still see the stars, so far away. The eyes can hold it all in if the mouth cannot. This is love.*

The University fires me.

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My father has stopped talking to me. He is going to get married again.

Who is my father? My father is not my father. He is not the boy who grew up near the water or the man who left us. He is like the stories he told us, a copy. He cannot live in the summer or the winter. He cannot understand the secrets.

My father is happy. My sister is happy. My mother is getting closer. My sister asks, "What were you doing while I was sick?" I will miss being atop the mountain looking up and up and up into the beginning of so many stars and galaxies. But mostly, I will miss the freedom and the brisk wind. I am not ready to die.

I want to tell you the story of my mother's death, but it begins with another story, a love story. Qays and Leyli were in love. Their parents forbade their love because Qays was too rich for Leyli. In his sadness, Qays set out into the desert surrounding his village. Out there, he starved himself until his mind fed him. He had visions—of a wedding and of a long and happy life with Leyli. Of a world without parents. His visions were white like the sun.

They found him out there in the wilderness, birds pecking at his eyes. He had died of thirst. When Leyli saw his body, she kneeled and kissed his bloody eyes. She told the village people that Qays had not died of thirst but of thirst for love. And *she* would have given it to him, she yelled at them. Then, Leyli took her father's sword and put it through her own eyes. The villagers believed her then, that Qays had gone crazy but also that his insanity had passed on to her. The villagers renamed Qays, gave him a title, Majnun,

which means “crazy for love.” They did not rename Leyli, though she had the sickness, because women were not given titles. But she had the sickness. She would have given it to him.

I want to tell you the story of my mother’s death. It doesn’t seem fair, though, to reveal all of her secrets. Crying doesn’t heal the eyes and instead is how we lose everything.

I want to tell you the story of my mother’s death, but the stars have disappeared. I never knew this was why I shouldn’t wish on them. No, it’s not my fault. My sister, the demon, ate the stars. If I rub her belly, she’ll smile and give them back to me.

I want to tell you the story of my mother’s death, but the rice is burning.

I want to tell you the story of my mother’s death, but it begins with me pretending that my father is dead. He died violently. Tiresias predicted it, and in the end, we return to the garden. My mother wanders, staring at flowers instead of smelling them. She finds the proof of my hatred, blood on a stone. No apples. I’m not hungry.

I want to tell you the story of my mother’s death, but she is not dead. You knew that already. She can see now, and I’m afraid she’ll never die.

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I want to tell you the story of my mother's death, but we will have to go home, to Nayriz.

In the hellish summer, the lake in the middle of many mountains dries up. The lake serves those who are lucky. Their luck is not drowning. Those who drown have some luck, too, though. They are shielded from the sun, and they are on the other side of the mirror.

My mother and I climb down so deep. We kneel on the lakebed in the middle of many mountains and let the silt run through our fingers. We pray for all of the things that have left us.