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An Overview of The Flower of Shoran:

A Kurdish Novel by ‘Atā Nahāyi

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An Overview of The Flower of Shoran:

A Kurdish Novel by ‘Atā Nahāyi

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Preface

The Flower of Shoran (Gūl-ī Shorān), written by ‘Atā Nahāyi was published in 1998 in Iran. It consists of eight chapters. This novel could be called a historical novel which spans the period between the two World Wars and a decade after the fall of the Republic of Mahabad in 1946. *The Flower of Shoran* has received some attention in literary circles in Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, and Kurdish Diaspora in Europe.

One of the predominant themes in Kurdish contemporary literature is Kurdish nationalism. Subsequently, I have chosen to discuss and translate parts of *The Flower of Shoran* which I believe, is one of the few literary works that has well captured the struggle of Iranian Kurds for recognition as a nation with a distinct language and identity. The novel shows how the political and historical upheavals emerging between the two World Wars affected the development of Kurdish nationalism and consequently the lives of the Iranian Kurds.

I have translated two chapters of *The Flower of Shoran* to illustrate the linguistic and literary qualities of the work and how the theme of nationalism has been worked into it.

Regarding the methodology of translation, I have tried to keep the integrity and flow of the story in English, although I have used the original Kurdish honorific titles and gender prefixes as used in Kurdish where I was not able to find a suitable equivalent in English. Moreover, I have intended to keep the local color of the work by a literal

rendering of the similes and certain idioms and phrases. I have also transliterated Kurdish names phonetically and have added letters when needed to direct the reader towards the correct pronunciation. At some points, I have provided extra descriptions to clarify some culture-specific traditions or to specify the category of things. For instance, I have added ‘a type of Kurdish clothing’ after a transliterated piece of clothing.

Abstract

An Overview of The Flower of Shoran:

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This thesis seeks to examine the Kurdish novel, *The Flower of Shoran* (1998) by Iranian Kurdish author, ‘Atā Nahāyi in the context of Kurdish identity search and nationalism and struggle to build a nation state. Considering that the setting of the novel is between the two World Wars which is arguably the most critical phase of Kurdish nationalism, the present study tries to give a brief overview of the historical events that shaped and oriented Kurdish nationalism. Subsequently, Nahāyi’s perspective on the question of Kurdish identity and nationalism in Iran which are the underlying themes of the novel is discussed.

Also a detailed summary has been provided along with the translation of the first two chapters of the novel to illustrate how a fairly successful Kurdish novel such as *The Flower of Shoran* has dealt with the Kurdish question of identity and nationalism in the context of Kurds' struggle for autonomy and recognition as a distinct nation.

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Chapter 1

A Historical Overview of Kurdish Nationalism in Iran

“The Kurds, among the most colorful and distinctive of Iranian tribal people, present a major problem for nationalism,” asserts Richard Cottam, the author of *Nationalism in Iran* (1964) in the beginning of his discussion of Kurdish nationalism (65). On one hand, he notes that the Kurds in Iran imagine a long and proud history for themselves, believing to have descended from the Medes, a Kurdish dynasty. A fact or a legend, it has resulted in a “cohesion” Cottam identifies as a distinctive unifying feature that has helped Iranian Kurds advance Kurdish nationalism. On the other hand, however, Cottam argues, there are two historical obstacles tampering with the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iran. First, the Kurds have never succeeded in forming “a stable state of their own” since ancient times. Second, throughout history the Kurds have been very closely associated with Iran and Iranian culture. In fact, the richness of Persian literature and culture vis-à-vis the “meager” Kurdish culture and the existence of opportunity for Kurds to attend Iranian universities, Cottam maintains, have to a large extent absorbed and assimilated the Kurds into Iranian culture. More contemporary historians such as Farideh Koohi-Kamali have argued similarly, tracing the origin of Iranian Kurds’ demand for autonomy rather than for independence in the common cultural heritage that connects the two nations (171-2).

The recent history of the Kurds and their nationalist movements in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria where the Kurds form a sizable minority shows that the Kurds, though assimilated on their own or provided for to be assimilated into the dominant cultures of the four nation-states, have continued to challenge the varying policies these states have adopted to deal with their Kurdish populations.

According to Michael Gunter, the editor of *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, there are two ways to look at the origins of the nation and nationalism (1). The first one is the primordial or essentialist approach which favors the argument that notions and consciousness of nations as monolithic entities have been there since ancient times. In order to substantiate that Kurdish nation is a primordial phenomenon, the adherents of this school of thought often tend to invoke examples from such books as the Iranian epic, *Shāhnāmeh* (10th CE), Sharaf Khān Bitlīsī's *Sharafnāma* (1597), a history of Kurdish emirates, and especially Ahmad-i Khānī's (1650-1707) 17th century epic poem, *Mem u Zin* (Mam and Zin), where there are explicit references to Kurds as a distinct nation, who are different from Arabs, Persians, and Turks.

Constructivists, on the other hand, Gunter explains, believe that nationalism is a phenomenon of the modern world which helped the process of nation-building. Arguing that the emergence of nation-states is a new phenomenon even in Europe, he asserts, it would be absurd to insist that cultural and political nationalism date back to a distant point in time (7). In fact, as Nader Entessar notes, “politicization of Kurdish ethnicity coincided with the formation of modern nation-state in the Middle East” (1). Previously,

since the formation of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran and the emergence of its rivalry with the Ottomans, the Kurdish tribes living on the frontiers, Koohi-Kamali reports, “switched loyalty from one state to another” or were used as mercenaries in the power struggle between the two empires (68). The presence of the foreign powers also determined where the allegiance of the Kurdish tribes stood.

Before the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which provided the opportunity for the emergence of different nation-states in the region, there was one major Kurdish excursion in 1880 led by the Kurdish chieftain Sheikh Obeydollah from Turkish Kurdistan into Iranian Kurdistan. Obeydollah proclaimed himself the king of Kurds near Lake Van in today’s Turkey and announced his motivation behind the excursion to be an effort to unite all the Kurdish tribes under the Ottoman suzerainty. “Obeydollah,” Cottam argues, “was defeated, but his actions served to spread a consciousness of being Kurdish to more of his people” (66). Other movements in other parts of Kurdistan took place prior to and after Obeydollah’s revolt but they shall not be discussed here because the present study intends to focus on the development of Kurdish nationalism in Iran and its reflection in modern Kurdish literature, and *The Flower of Shoran* in particular.

Before World War I, the social arrangement of Kurdistan of Iran was mostly tribal. The nomadic Kurds, unaware of nationalist thoughts and ideas followed the order of their khan and were usually unhappy with the Iranian central government’s unfair treatment and heavy taxations. The percentage of urban and nontribal population was

very low. Koohi-Kamali describes the relationship between the tribesmen and nontribal Kurds at that time:

“as one of domination and exploitation of the latter by the former, economically by looting from them and collecting dues from them to provide tribesmen (particularly the military men of the chief) with goods and money, socially and politically by imposing the social/political structure of the tribe on the nontribal population” (71).

The second major uprising, which took place in the power vacuum after World War I in Iranian Kurdistan near Urmia, was Ismail Agha Simko’s revolt. He was the chief of the Shakak confederation, one of the several confederations that Koohi-Kamali reports, came into existence following the implementation of *tanzimat* by Persian and Ottoman empires to solidify their central power by enforcing a tighter control of their frontiers (69-70). Ismail Agha defeated government forces on several occasions during his sovereign rule from 1918 to 1922. A periodical under different names was published during his reign. His motives seems to have been mostly personal and tribal, even though he made use of nationalistic terminology to keep up with the mood of the time, and perhaps, to justify his raids into other areas and the plundering that ensued. Surprisingly, despite the progression of other nationalistic movements around Simko, chief among which were the nationalist movements led by Sheikh Mohammad Khiabani in Tabriz and Kuchak Khan Jangali in Gilan, his revolt wasn’t motivated by a nationalist cause. Simko’s uprising, Koohi-Kamali argues, was destined to fail because it was characterized

mainly by “tribal/face-to-face” relationships and personal ambitions and moreover it did not attract the support of the majority of the Kurds. Therefore, similar to Obeydollah’s, Simko’s revolt did not assist the Kurdish nationalist cause much other than leaving a memory of a powerful Kurdish chieftain challenging the Iranian state authority (87).

Following Simko’s defeat, Reza Shah’s repressive policies, Entessar writes, resulted in closing of Kurdish schools and a ban on writing and publishing in Kurdish. His imposition of “artificial Persian consciousness” implemented by the Society for Public Guidance alienated the ethnic minorities (13). Tribes were forced to settle and ethnic clothes were also replaced by a national uniform. In order to economically repress the minorities, especially the Kurds, Reza Shah did not extend his modernization and economic projects to Kurdistan, i.e. no new roads or factories were built and no employment opportunities were created. Even the tobacco business, the main source of revenue for Kurdistan, was monopolized by the government. It was only after the fall of Reza Shah in 1941 that ethnic minorities and their nationalist movements began to reassert themselves.

The third and arguably the most significant movement in Iranian Kurdistan, was the establishment of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in January 1946. In describing the movement, Koohi-Kamali uses the term “passive revolution” which she adopts from Gramsci. A passive revolution, she explains is “advocated by ‘an external force’ and is led by the intelligentsia but does not enjoy a wide-spread mass participation (90). Due to the tribal live-style of the Kurds characterized by rivalry with other tribes, many of the

tribes did not support the Republic, or if they did, withdrew their support once they realized that Iranian forces were on their way to topple the Republic. The Republic collapsed in December 1946 and the Iranian government forces took over Mahabad, executed the leaders of the movement, and burned all the books and periodicals published in Kurdish. As short-lived as it was, the movement of 1946 was a major turning point in the history of Kurdish nationalism. Stemming from the Republic, major cultural and political awareness swept through the Kurds. “Kurdish became the official language, and Kurdish-language periodicals and literary publications flourished” (Entessar 23). Koohi-Kamali also notes that “all Persian primary school textbooks were translated into Kurdish.” Teaching Kurdish in schools began and a group of students were sent to Soviet Union to pursue education in a military academy. Hashem Ahmadzadeh reports that it was Rahīm Qāzī, one of the students sent to Soviet Union, who later wrote and published the first Kurdish novel, *Peshmerge* (Guerilla) in the Sorani dialect which was published in Baghdad in 1961.

Following the fall of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946, for a second time, all manifestations of Kurdish nationalism were destroyed by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s government. There were no revolts in this period until the revolution of 1979. Only for the short period under the liberal government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, according to Entessar that Kurdish nationalism began to revive briefly. Shah’s Land Reform and his father, Reza Shah’s forced sedentarization policies which were introduced to modernize and unify the Iranian nation under the banner of Persian nation, Koohi-Kamali maintains, worked in favor of Kurdish nationalism in the long run.

One of the reasons that the Republic of Mahabad failed, she argues, was the lingering tribal structure of Kurdish society that impeded urban intellectual nationalist efforts by withdrawing their support and switching loyalties. Koohi-Kamali argues that the implementation of forced settlement and Land Reform policies caused massive migrations and displacement of rural populations and a boom in the urban population which through materializing wider involvement of poorer communities resulted in further “political development of Kurdish nationalism in Iran” (201).

In January 1979 the Kurdish Peshmerge (guerillas) took Kurdistan out of the control of the Shah’s government officials and helped the revolutionary forces of Ayatollah Khomeini to topple the monarchy. The Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) which first came into being a few years before the establishment of the Republic of Mahabad and had been active clandestinely during Shah’s reign was in the forefront of the campaign to secure autonomy for Kurdistan in Iran. In April 1979, the KDPI presented an autonomy program to the new government which was turned down by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the subsequent negotiations with the new central government of Tehran also failed and Kurdistan came under the offensive of Revolutionary Guards sent by Ayatollah Khomeini. Kurdish forces were defeated and further negotiations for compromised demands never came to fruition. Soon, the Iran-Iraq war broke out and, according to Koohi-Kamali, the Kurdish forces of the two countries were played against each other by the Iranian and Iraqi regimes (190). This resulted in further weakening of KDPI. Following the Iran-Iraq war which ended in August 1988, further solidification of the central government in Tehran has frustrated Kurdish nationalists and diminished their

strength. Koohi-Kamali concludes that unless there is a change in government, the Kurds will not have a chance to advance their nationalist demands in Iran (196).

Chapter 2

Overview of Kurdish Literature and The Flower of Shoran

“Cultural historians often assume that there is a direct relationship between the state of literary art and the state of the nation, so that literary change becomes a metaphor for national resurgence or national decline,” (Parrinder 2). This statement might not be applicable to all literatures of the world but contemporary Iranian literature, much influenced by new ideas and social and political upheavals of the recent history, is certainly a case in point. From Fath-Ali Akhūndzādeh (1812-1878), who called on Iranian intellectuals and writers to address social issues in a realistic manner and criticized his contemporary decadent literary forms for their failure to do so down to Nīmā Yūshīj (1896-1960) who broke with the tradition of writing poetry in classical form by introducing free verse and individuality in his poetry and Sādeq Hedāyat (1903-1951), who began writing prose in an idiom far from the pompous language of Persian court clerks and historians, and the flowery prose of Sa‘dī (1184 – 1283/1291?), one can clearly see how new literary trends were gradually adopted and modified to meet the modern Iranian nationalist and cultural demands. In an article called “Iranian Nationalism and Modernist Persian Literature,” Michael Hillmann, mentions two reasons for paying exclusive attention to modernist literature. First, modernist Persian literature, he notes, reflects “the very issues of Iranian versus Western values” and second, it “is a dramatic reflection of a fundamental change in the function of literature, the role of the literary

artist, and the composition of the literary audience in Iran” (71). Traditionalist literature, he argues, tended to avoid new issues or at best if they did not, the traditional forms employed were not capable of mirroring the complexities of the modern Iranian society. Therefore, Iranian nationalism and the complexities of the modern Iran, the phenomena of the modern world were advanced on another front, modernist literature. He goes on to point out the names of several prose and poetry writers that who in one way or another addressed the nationalist concerns and developments of Iranian society after the two World Wars. Sadeq Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl* (1941) is an exemplary reflection of the preoccupations of an atypical Iranian man in transition from the idealized traditional Iran into a complicated modern Iranian society. Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s “The Mobilization of Iran” (1946), Hillmann notes, voices the concerns of an emerging urban lower middle class towards the invasion of Iran by the Allied forces during World War II. In the realm of poetry, Nīmā Yūshīj and later other modernist poets such as Ahmad Shāmlū (1925-2000) and Mehdi Akhavān Sāles (1928-1990) were at the forefront of advancing modernist poetry which they believed had the capability to mirror the modern world with its complexities. For instance, in “In This Dead End,” Shāmlū uses free verse rather than classical forms to reflect the adverse political atmosphere of his contemporary Iran. Likewise, Akhavān Sāles, pits the chivalrous society of Iran as described in the 3rd century Ferdowsi’s *Shāhnāmeh* against the modern Iranian society which he describes as degenerate and criticizes as “The End of Shāhnāmeh,” a title he chooses to dramatize the loss of the old morals and traditions.

Unlike Persian literature, the evolution and transition of Kurdish literature from traditional to modern are not easily identifiable. First, there never existed, in history a strong Kurdish dynasty to patronize the development of Kurdish literature. In fact, the tribal nature of Kurdish society since the Medes Dynasty and the lack of a unified central government to enforce the use of the Kurdish language in administrative affairs impeded the gradual development and evolution of Kurdish language. In modern era, since the emergence of the Safavid Dynasty in Iran and its rivalry with the Ottomans, the Kurds have lived in different societies and therefore have been exposed to different systems of education and social forms. The emergence of the new nation-states of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey and the haphazard division of the Kurds into these states made the situation even more difficult for the Kurds to develop a national literature. As a result of this division and the adoption of often aggressive policies of denial of Kurdish identity by the dominant states governing the Kurds, the Kurds, Ahmadzadeh notes, have been suffering from “the lack of a unified political objectivity” which has affected all other aspects of Kurdish culture, especially Kurdish literature (130).

Furthermore, Ahmadzadeh explains that lack of unity and state-sponsorship confronted the Kurds with the challenge of developing a common alphabet, a common standardized language, and a common education system, and publishing and circulating literary works (30).

With all the difficulties hampering the even development of Kurdish literature, before the rise of nationalism in Kurdistan, still a fair number of poets produced works in

the classical tradition of Arabic and Persian poetry. These poets such as Ahmād-i Khānī (1650-1707), Mawlawī (1806-1882-3), and Nālī (1800-56) were mostly associated with and patronized by a Sufi order or a traditional religious school (*madrasa*) where they also received their education. Their poetry usually follows the same love and mystic traditions predominant in Arabic and Persian literature of the time. For instance, Malā-yi Jizrī (born ca. 1570 and died ca. 1640), one of the earliest Kurdish poets, travelled extensively throughout the Middle East and Persia, and, according to Encyclopedia Iranica, “sought to emulate” Hafez, the celebrated Persian lyric poet. Among these classical poets, Ahmad-i Khānī is known to have expressed Kurdish nationalist sentiments and called for the unity of Kurds in his tragic love epic *Mam u Zīn*. Towards the end of 19th century Hājī Qāder Koyī (ca. 1816-94) who “came into contact with foreign ideas” through his travelling to Istanbul, employed modern elements and engaged in social criticism (Encyclopedia Iranica, Kurdish Written Literature).

In 1898, the first Kurdish newspaper was published in Cairo, an indication that Kurds had begun to become aware of their national identity which was to be reflected in their literature. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and with it the Kurds’ hopes for independence, many Kurdish intellectuals were forced by the new Turkish nationalist government into exile in Syria where modern Kurdish literature in the Kurmanji dialect began to emerge

In Turkey, due to the repressive policies adopted by the new nationalist government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the following governments against using

Kurdish, there were almost no Kurdish publications until 1991 when the ban was lifted and Kurdish literature began to reemerge. In Iraq, under the British mandate (1920-32), writing and publishing in the Sorani dialect flourished. The poets of this early period still wrote poetry in the classical form, but patriotic and socialist themes were predominant. In 1930s, the classical forms were abandoned, for example in the poetry of Gorān ('Abd-Allāh Solaymān, 1904-62) and later other poets such as Sālem (Shaikh Sālem Aḥmad Azabānī, 1892-1959), Delzār (Aḥmad Moṣṭafā Ḥama Āḡā, b. 1920), Bekas (Fakī 'Abd-Allāh, 1905-48) and his son Sherko Bekas (b. 1940), followed in his footsteps (Encyclopedia Iranica).

The arrival of printing presses in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1919 helped the emergence of literary magazines, which in turn, paved the way for the birth of short story writing in the Sorani dialect. These short stories, as can be expected, were heavily informed by patriotic and nationalist themes. Ahmadzadeh reports that until 1990s, the number of translated and written short stories in Kurdish was by far greater than the number of translated and written novels. In fact, the first Kurdish short story in the Kurmanji dialect was published as early as 1913 in a periodical and in Sorani dialect in 1925 which is much earlier than the publication of the first novel in the Sorani dialect in 1961 (158-9). Contrary to what occurred in Europe and other countries in the Middle East, Kurdish short story writing preceded novel writing. Ahmadzadeh argues that the reason for that could be the fact that writing and publishing novels “required large economic sources and wider reading public” (161). Although the first Kurdish novel was written as early as 1935 in the

Soviet Union, novel writing was to appear in 1980s and become more popular in 1990s in all parts of Kurdistan.

In Iranian Kurdistan, there was not much publication in Kurdish until after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. An exception to this is the short period of autonomy accorded under the 1946 Kurdish Republic of Mahabad during which Kurdish language became official and two acclaimed Kurdish poets, Hazhār and Hemin, now recognized as national poets, started publishing poetry in Kurdish and a few literary periodicals came out. After 1979, however, there has been a steady growth in the use of Kurdish language in publishing literary works and periodicals. The novel, *The Flower of Shoran*, which is the subject of this study, falls within the category of the novels published in the relatively more welcoming atmosphere set in after 1979.

With a brief look at the five Kurdish and the five Persian novels studied by Ahmadzadeh in *and Novel: A study of Persian and Kurdish Narrative Discourse* (2003), one clearly sees the difference of focus between the two categories. All of the Kurdish novels except for one are predominantly informed by nationalist themes and a search for a national identity while the Persian novels seem to have passed that early stage of searching for a national identity and are more concerned with either a personal identity crisis or social and political affairs.

The Flower of Shoran, however, is concerned with both a national and a personal identity crisis. The novel, narrated mostly in flashbacks from different points of view is focused on a family crisis and its subsequent disintegration in the context of the Iranian

Kurdish nationalist struggle between the two World Wars and a decade after. The novel covers arguably the most critical period of Kurdish nationalism. The foreign powers have arrived in Kurdistan and this time it is the Russian army instead of a tribal chieftain that burns down the Kurds' homes. Mandatory modernization projects of Reza Shah, including sedentarization and unification policies, are being forcefully implemented in the region. The protagonist, Las, is required to speak Persian in school and the police force people to observe the imposed Western dress code instead of wearing the traditional Kurdish clothes. The Russian army arrives in Kurdistan for a second time during World War II and helps the Kurds to form an autonomous government in Kurdistan. Soon, after the Russian Red Army withdraws its support, the Republic of Mahabad (January-December 1946) falls and all hopes for Kurdish nationalism are lost. The grim silence following the loss of the temporary freedom the Kurds had achieved is represented by Las's presumed death and stifled voice in prison for fifteen years.

In the novel, three generations of Kurds are represented by one middle class Kurdish family whose lives are projected against the backdrop of the two World Wars and a silent decade that follows the fall of the Republic of Mahabad.

The first generation consists of Las's parents, a lower middle class family who are mostly uneducated and their lives are run by tribal policies. They have a traditional belief system and face-to-face relationships. Their status is usually passed on from their forefathers to them. They take life and its hardships for granted and lead a stoical life and fear the government and mistrust the foreign powers, especially the Russians who have

no religion. This generation's lives are drastically affected by the ravaging consequences of tribal feuds and World War I, but their mindset never changes and they are not conscious of a separate Kurdish identity.

The second generation is the generation of Las and his revolutionary friend Baram. This is a generation that grows up and gets some education in Reza Shah's modern schooling system. At the same time, they witness the suppression of people at the hands of the agents of Reza Shah's government and feudal powers and develop resentment for them. Through the presence of the Soviet Red Army and the formation of the Republic of Mahabad, they become acquainted with nationalist ideas and are lured into the Kurdish struggle for freedom and autonomy in Kurdistan. Unlike the previous generation, this generation is more revolutionary, trustful of foreign powers, and welcomes new ideas. The members of this generation believe they can change the status quo and struggle to achieve their goals. The reader is confronted with the bitter reality of their failure and lost hopes upon learning that Las's youngest brother, Hiwa (hope) who was named by Las is a retarded child who smells of feces. A disturbed young boy whose growth is stunted, Hiwa represents the outcome of the Kurdish struggle for autonomy.

Furthermore, Mother Guleh's ambivalent attitude towards Las well represents the destiny of this generation whose presence and absence is problematic and disturbing. Mother Guleh, who had awaited her son's return for a long time, now cannot welcome him because his presence means another blow to the foundation of the family just as his absence was. His departure was a big loss to the family and his presumed death is implied

to have caused the family scandal that the unlawful relationship between his younger brother Farkha and his presumed widow Khanzad caused. Now his return is going to deal another blow to the integrity of the family. Las, frustrated with the oppressive policies of the government and the hooliganism of the tribal khans, joined the Peshmerges of the newly formed Republic of Mahabad in 1946 in order to bring freedom to his people, like his legendary namesake hero who went to bring the flower of Shoran for his beloved. While symbolically, he had gone to bring a bucket of water to douse the fire of the town with and save its people, his decision not only did not bring happiness to the family but it actually caused the family a great amount of suffering. Now his return is ironically not welcomed by the people he had tried to save by sacrificing his own life and his family's.

Farkha and Khanzad are the other side of the coin. Farkha plays the role of the foil character to Las. He doesn't show any interest in Uncle Nayer's tales which become a source of inspiration for young Las to make brave decisions later in life such as leaving his family and joining the Peshmerge forces. Uncle Nayer refuses to give Farkha a name. He joins the looters when the town is in state of chaos. He drinks alcohol and sleeps with Las's widow Khanzad and dishonors the family but he also attracts the sympathy of the reader when he is given the chance to tell his side of the story. Khanzad, Las's presumed widow is a kind-hearted simple woman who performs nothing more than her traditional duties of house-keeping and taking care of children. She does not share Las's ideals and ambitions and is unhappy that he is lured by Baram to become involved in the struggle. She also gains the reader's sympathy when she is given a voice. It is only natural, the reader finds out, that she get involved with Farkha and eventually marries him.

In short, all of the characters belonging to this generation, including Farkha, Khanzad, and the aged Guleh are affected by the rise of Kurdish nationalism and Las's decision to get involved. They all suffer as a result of the movement's failure. Las, who returns after fifteen years of imprisonment, is shocked to see his mother give him the cold shoulder. At a point, he even doubts his existence. It is only through reviewing old memories and the events of the past fifteen years that he realizes that he has no place among the living. In fact, the failure of the movement becomes synonymous with his symbolic and eventually literal death which he chooses at the end. One of the very poignant moments that very directly touches upon the fact that Kurds have no homeland and suffer as a result is when he is asked by the Iraqi officer if he prefers to be jailed by the Iranians or the Iraqis. There is a moment when the reader wonders where the Kurds indeed belong. The Iraqi officer's question cannot but imply that the Kurds are confined either to Iranian or Iraqi identity. There is no way out. The only alternative to that is jail again under the suzerainty of either Iranian or Iraqi governments.

The third generation, represented by Las's young son, Yadgar, is a generation that has a distant and blurry memory of the last generation because the members of last generation, ashamed or regretful of their past, have chosen not to communicate their experiences to the younger generation. The new generation gets the opportunity to attend college and experience a wider world. Yadgar, who has only seen a photograph of his father, and knows him only through the good memories his grandmother has related to him of his father, cannot relate to his father. The end of the story is about Yadgar's hike in the mountains in search of his father. Unlike his father who is described in the opening scene

of the novel was so obsessed with reaching home that he could not enjoy the beauties of nature, Yadgar enjoyed the scenery and the open fields and hearing the sound of running waters. He has no worries. He is completely detached from his father's concerns and cares. He is a young teenager bound for a different life and future. He is for life and unlike the rest of the characters of the story who are all in one way or another about to die or symbolically dead, he enjoys his life and wants to be detached from the dark past of his family and the previous generation. He refuses to stay in the stalemate the older generation is grappling with. He is hopeful and happy and wants to enjoy life as we see that all he could tell his mother and uncle when faced with their pains, is to forget their past and move on with their lives and seize the moment.

Chapter 3

Plot Summary

In the opening chapter, the protagonist of the novel Las returns home from prison after fifteen year on the anniversary of his own presumed death. His youngest brother, Hiwa who is retarded opens the door to him. Their house looks old and the mulberry tree is burnt. Mother Guleh, Las's mother is not very excited about his return and gives him the cold shoulder. Las is shocked at his mother's attitude and asks for explanations and the whereabouts of Khanzad, his wife and his son Yadgar who was one year old when he left to join the Kurdish liberation forces in Mahabad. Mother Guleh is unwilling to answer his questions and does not want to accept that he is alive. Finally she gives in and relates to Las what had happened during his absence. She also expresses her concern at his likely intent to go out of the house because she doesn't want anyone to learn of his return. He goes to the roof of the stable annex where past memories swarm his mind.

In the flash back we learn about Las's childhood and his emotional attachment to Uncle Nayer the old story-teller who lived with them. We also learn that Khazad, his future wife is his cousin. One of his main interests is having Uncle Nayer recite him ballads from memory. One particular ballad which is especially intriguing is the heroic story of Las and Khazal. In the ballad Las embarks on a quest into a foreign land after the flower of Shoran for Khazal, his beloved, finds it, and comes back victoriously.

Las is preoccupied with what his mother told him and grows doubtful of his own existence as a result. Therefore he suddenly rushes to his mother's room to find his date of birth written by his father inside the back cover of a Quran. He was born three days after the Russian invasion of Iran during World War I. The next flash back takes the reader back through Mother Guleh's memories to the time of World War I when Baneh, the town of Mother Guleh and her husband's residence, is set on fire by the Russian army. People have to abandon their homes. Famine and war leave lots of casualties among whom are Mother Guleh's old parents and Khanzad's father and two young siblings. When they return home after a year, they find Uncle Nayer sleeping under a mulberry shoot sprung up in the ruins of their house. He joins the family of Wisu Agha who is a land-owner and an employee of the town's finance office.

Chapter II begins in the morning of the second day after Las's return. Las asks his mother about Hiwa, his retarded brother and the reason for his condition. Mother Guleh says that he was fine until he was five years old, then he became ill and got worse and worse every day. Las is preoccupied with the question of why he must not go out of the house while his mother, his brother, and his wife have committed the sin not him. Throughout that day, he stays inside and goes over his childhood memories.

Las comes back from school and kisses his brother in the cradle. Uncle Nayer had refused to name him. He had given Las and Khanzad their names. Wisu Agha had named the baby boy Ferkha. Uncle Nayer is the source of knowledge and love to Las and

Khanzad. He takes them out on strolls and teaches them how to love and appreciate nature and its offerings.

One day when Las is coming back from school with friends he sees a crowd. He finds out that Nazdar, a girl in their neighborhood had been attacked and dishonored by Officer Hussein who was bribed by Hama Rashid to do so. That incident causes Las to begin resenting government and everything associated with it. His resentment becomes stronger by another incident he witnesses in the street. Officer Rashi cuts off the crotch of Ahmad the master tailor's Kurdish pants for overlooking the government's law that enforced the use of the national uniform.

One day, Las realizes that Uncle Nayer is ill and brings that to his mother and father's attention. They simply dismiss it saying that Uncle Nayer is old. Las is frustrated at their insensitivity. Finally a doctor comes to see him with no avail. Uncle Nayer dies under the mulberry tree before Las and Khanzad's eyes. Las who is traumatized by Uncle Nayer's death falls ill and doesn't recover until the fall of the following year. When he recovers he sees that Khanzad has grown and falls in love with her. The two get married and have a small wedding ceremony. As is the custom, Las throws an apple at the bride. Farkha, his brother catches it in the air. According to tradition, anyone who catches the apple will also soon find his own bride.

Chapter III opens with Farkha who has heard the news of Las's return on a day he is dealing with a problem at work and as a result he is already depressed. Khanzad also hears about Las's return from Marif, his aunt's son. Marif saw Las on the day of his

return and followed him to the house to become certain that he was not mistaken.

Khanzad has confused feelings. She cries and wishes that she could tell Farkha to do the same. Yadgar has also learned about his father's return at school. He comes home from school and seeks refuge in a room away from others. Khanzad tries to take the opportunity to talk to Farkha but Farkha keeps quiet and stares at a point on the wall where Las's picture used to be. He had taken it off, Khanzad remembers that he had done so under the pretext of changing its frame. Farkha imagines Las and his mother relating old memories and sympathizing with each other. He remembers he had not talked to his mother for a while last year until he had a nightmare and then he went to make amends. He told his mother about his nightmare. She wished Farkha and Khanzad always have such nightmares.

Khanzad takes the reader back to when the Russian army captures Baneh again after World War II. She hears the unpleasant news from Marif, his aunt's son, and rushes her mother home before Las gets back home angry at them for being outside on such a day. The two women see Iranian army soldiers running around asking for Kurdish clothes to disguise themselves from the Russian Army.

Farkha witnesses the Russian army led by their armored cars enter the town. The residents of the town go out to welcome them in the hope they would take pity on them and would not plunder and burn the town. The Jewish residents of the town also try to bribe the Russian army by slaughtering a bull on their path into town as a sign of welcoming.

That night two Kurdish sergeants seek refuge in Wisu Agha's home. Khanzad knows one of them. He had once before visited them to see Las. Khanzad wonders why they are happy at the government's downfall while they are in the government's army. Wisu Agha believes the Russian Army could not be trusted. Las argues that they are different from the Russian Army that burned the city during World War I. When Khanzad sees the Russian soldiers, she realizes from their red skin why they are called the Red Army. Mother Guleh says the Russian are more pagan than the Jews because the Jews at least do not have women in their army and refuse to eat crabs and frogs. The Russians leave the town untouched but the nomads instead invade the town and plunder the administration offices and storages. Farkha participates the looting. Las catches him in the act and brings him home. The Khan of the town lets go of the families of the Iranian officials but they are plundered and raped by the opportunist village heads. Khanzad is terrified at hearing the news. She wonders what Las thinks of the women who were raped and decides that Las sympathized only with the husbands and fathers of the women who were dishonored.

Baram, the Kurdish sergeant who was hiding in Wisu Agha's home on the night of the Russian invasion, visits Las at home and reassures them that they will soon hear good news. Khanzad cannot hide her dislike for Baram who always gives Las papers to read and whispers to him things she does not know about.

Khanzad wakes up in the morning delirious. She does not wish to get up when Yadgar walks in and says good morning. She sees his face and body figure blurry and

doesn't notice when he walks out. Farkha and Khanzad both think that Yadgar has gone to see his father. Khanzad is worried that she might lose him too.

Chapter IV is Las's flash back to fifteen years earlier. People are frightened by a rumor that Khan is about to set the town on fire. Las discourages the family from abandoning their house because he believes that it's just a trick to scare people away so that Khan's men could easily loot people's houses. Mother prays and Wisu Agha reads the Quran to ward off the looming threat.

On the first day of hearing the rumor men gather in the mosque to consult with each other. Khan is furious that the Begzadeh tribes have refused to help him fight the government forces and promises to leave no town for them to live in after he is gone. Two wise men of the town promise to talk Khan into leniency.

Las is met by Farkha on his way home. He thinks that the baby must be born. Farkha, however, tells him that Baram and two of his friends waited for him in the house. He rushes home but misses them since they have already left by the time he gets home. Baram has left him the *Nishtiman* (homeland) periodical. He reads the article dealing with the question of the nomads but is disappointed to find it unsuccessful in answering his questions.

Three days after Khanzad gives birth to Yadgar, Khan's riflemen confront government forces and are defeated. Everyone fears that Khan will burn the town now that he has been defeated. Baram, however is hopeful and speaks to Las of the imminent

uprising of the Kurdish nation. He believes that the nomads will also soon unite under the flag of the Kurdish nation. Freedom and nation are new concepts to Las.

Feeqeh Rahim, a friend of Wisu Agha's sends him two horses on which they carry their belongings out of town. Las helps Shelemo, a Jewish neighbor, load his belongings on a horse. Las sees his family off to the bridge over the river running by the town and returns home. He is worried they will burn Uncle Nayer's mulberry tree which at the end of the night they will do.

The next morning when Mother Guleh asks how one could extinguish this fire, Wisu Agha responds, "with a cup of water". Las symbolically says that he will go after the cup of water to put out the fire. He promises not to return before he accomplishes his mission. That night, Las and Khanzad sleep like two strangers next to each other. In the morning, Las leaves.

On the fourth day of his return Las asks his mother what his son Yadgar looks like. He has had a dream about Yadgar the night before. Someone knocks at the door and Mother Guleh goes to open the door herself before Hiwa gets to it. Las imagines a crowd of people, in fact the entire town, gathered at the house to see him. Farkha, Khanzad and Yadgar are also among them. Farkha and Khanzad have come to confess to their sin and ask him for forgiveness. Mother Guleh comes back and says that the person who knocked had the wrong address.

At night Las dreams of walking alone in the woods. He is followed by a dog and specters. Next he arrives at a spring which runs into a pond. He meets his wife and son

and they act as if they had never been separated. Las asks his mother about his son's looks and manners. Mother Guleh gives terse answers. She has started again to restore every small crack in the walls. When they rebuilt the house after the fire, Wisu Agha said he didn't have much trust in it. He said that he felt the house would tumble on him one day. Since then, she has become obsessed with the maintenance of the house. Las comes and sits by her and asks again if his son looked like him. Las had thought about his son and what he would look like for years in prison. Mother Guleh finally says he does.

In chapter V, having seen Mother Guleh's hesitation to ask Yadgar to come and visit them, Las decides the two do not have a good relationship. That's why mother Guleh doesn't know much about him. Mother Guleh on the other hand wonders why Yadgar hasn't come to visit them. She is worried about him. Las is disgusted by Hiwa again and kicks him when he doesn't stop laughing. Mother Guleh reminds him that that is the souvenir of his journey, a stinky 'hope'. Las doesn't know that Yadgar is the only person in the family who is not disgusted by Hiwa and helps his grandmother clean him and the house.

Everyone hates Hiwa. Even Mother Guleh and Wisu Agha didn't welcome his birth and didn't bother themselves with finding a good name for him. When Las who was away heard of his mother's new baby boy, he sent word for them to name him Hiwa which means hope in Kurdish.

Mother Guleh insists that she will go after Las and will bring him home. Wisu Agha who is now bed-ridden says that Las will not return. He sends someone after him

with a letter that states his wish for his return. Las cannot believe his father has such a request of him while he knows better than everyone else why he has taken arms. Wisu Agha angrily tells the man who brings him the news that he should have told him he was under the leadership of the same person who burned the town. Wisu Agha dies a week before the fall of Kurdish Republic of Mahabad and Mother Guleh is forced to postpone her plans of going after Las.

Months later hires the same person who Wisu Agha sent after Las. They have to cross mountains to get to Mahabad. On the way, they are stuck in a storm and have to take refuge with a weird and quiet old man. They are scared at first and later find out that he is also waiting for some of his family and friends to return. The quiet old man suddenly starts talking deliriously saying that he has been waiting for thousands of people who have never returned. He speaks of his trips to the town in search of them. He describes the town and its residents for them in a very expressive manner. Next morning they leave quietly without awaking the old man. When they get to town, they find it deserted and depressed. Only hunch-backed old men wander in the marketplace. Members of Iranian army walk around and laugh. The town has been recaptured. Mother Guleh is led to Baram's house where she doesn't hear any good news about the whereabouts of Las. She is sent from house to house looking for Las and after three days she gathers enough evidence and hears enough rumors to think that Las might be dead. She goes back with her doubts to Khanzad and before they know it people start coming in to offer their condolences.

In chapter IV, Farkha has refused to go to work for five days since he heard the news of Las's return. He goes over his memories of the year when the town was burned and they had to leave for Miraweh, a village nearby. There he helps the Jewish girl Leyla out of a muddy stream which was caused by the heavy rain. While he is helping her out of the water he feels her bosom pressed against his body and falls in love with her. When they come back to Baneh she comes to visit him at their house while Farkha and the rest of his family are mourning over Las's death. She is the only one who seems to be always there to give him emotional support. After that Farkha helped by a friend tries to find a way to talk to her and express his love for her. He decides he can stop her while she is on her way to the spring to get water. After several attempts he finally manages to talk to her and to tell her of his love.

Farkha who is sitting in the house in silence, smiles when he reaches the part in his memories when he tells Leyla that he loves her. Khanzad notices that and an inner feeling tells her that Farkha's smile was for another woman. Farkha is aware that she knows about her past relationship with Leyla. She once told Farkha that he wasn't anything like a man. To her, a man was someone who acted like Las, kissed his child in the morning, and asked his wife if she needed anything before leaving for work.

After Las's presumed death, Khanzad who now has nobody except for his ex-husband's family stays in Wisu Agha's house. She is warned by Mother Guleh to watch herself as a widow to protect the family's honor. Farkha who is now in love is the only source of joy in the family. He comes home happy and makes Khanzad laugh. Farkha

discloses his love for Leyla to Khanzad and says he cannot live without Shelemo's daughter. Khanzad wonders if she has ever heard Las express his love for her so openly.

When asked by Farkha if she would convert to Islam so they could marry each other, Leyla resolutely refuses to do so, explaining that she wants to be part of the destiny of her tribe which has been nothing but suffering. Farkha, however, says that he would convert to Judaism if that would help. Farkha agrees to continue their relationship and enjoy passing time with her. He starts telling Khanzad what goes between Leyla and him. That starts to become annoying to Khanzad as she feels that Farkha's attitude towards his relationship with Leyla is disrespectful of women. Khanzad also starts to be sexually frustrated as Farkha continues to tell her of his romantic experiences with Leyla. She is full of sexual desire and on occasions she stands in front of the window without headscarf for men to see him. Embarrassed at doing so, she reproaches herself. One day she asks Farkha the reason for his sadness. Farkha tells her that Shelemo and his daughter Leyla are also leaving for Palestine. That makes Khanzad happy. After a while, Farkha starts to look at his sister-in-law as a woman and make sexual advances toward her. On a fall night he comes home drunk and they make love. Immediately after, they feel extremely guilty. Farkha walks out of the room and Khanzad doesn't know what to do with her sense of shame.

In chapter VII, Mother Guleh starts to tell her side of the story. She had been waiting for Las all through the fifteen years when Las was missing. That night as soon as she heard the knock on the door, she thought it must be Las. She wanted to run and hug

him but suddenly she changed her mind. When Las said that he had come back to be barked at by the dogs of his own land she thought Las was mistaken to care about these people at all. These same people had laughed and ridiculed her and her family when Wisu Agha died and Las went away.

On the sixth day after Las's return, she decided that it was enough and she couldn't pretend anymore and ignore Las, especially when Las started to turn around the burnt trunk of the mulberry tree. She remembered Las had done the same thing as a child.

Mother Guleh tells Las that Uncle Nayer has been visiting her in her dreams. She says that Las had the right to know everything. Apparently everybody in the town knew of Farkha and Khanzad's relationship except for Mother Guleh. People said she pretended not to be aware of it. Finally the news of their unlawful relationship is given to her by someone like common knowledge. She gets so infuriated that she runs home from the spring, grabs Khanzad by the hair, beats her up, and throws both of them out of her house.

When Las hears the true story, he feels he is relieved for the first time after his return. He looks at the beautiful sunset that reminds him of a sunset after the fall of the Republic of Mahabad when he was in dilemma whether to go with those companions who went to USSR or with his other closer companions who went to Iraq. He decides to go to Iraq. Mother Guleh and Las hug and burst out crying. Las had been living with death all through the fifteen years except for a short period when he went to Sulaimaniyah, Iraq and thought he was free. But he got arrested by an Iraqi officer who

asked him if he preferred to die at the hands of the Iranians or the Iraqis. Las tells his mother that he will leave and assures her that he is going to die this time to make sure she will not wait for him.

In chapter VIII, Yadgar tells his side of the story from the first person point of view. He has refused to go see his father for no particular reason. He was prepared for his return. Mother Guleh had told him of her dream that Las was on his way home. On the seventh day, however he decides to go and see his father. The night before the seventh day he thinks about the connotations his father's name has for him. He repeats his name over and over. He feels bad for Khanzad and Farkha and thinks that no one is tied to his or her past and should only think of one's present. He feels bad for Hiwa more than anyone else because he is helpless and he doesn't understand that he is. He refuses to tell his mother that he has been thinking of his father. He remembers that whenever he did that as a child, it made his mother cry. Farkha had said that he should stop visiting his grandmother because she taught him to ask after his father. He heard of his father's return at school and pretended that he was aware of his return. But he did not know what his father looked like. He had seen a close-up picture of him but it didn't relate him to his father.

Yadgar goes to visit his father at Mother Guleh's house. On the way to the house, lots of memories conjure up in his mind. He remembers that Farkha one day comes to school to get him and takes him home which is a different place from Mother Guleh's house. Yadgar realizes that Mother Guleh has asked them to leave. When he gets to the

house and Mother Guleh opens the door to him he thinks that she is upset with him and that is why she is not happy. He finds out that his father has left two hours earlier. He asks his grandmother if she thinks the story has ended. Before he leaves he asks his grandmother if she wants to get rid of the burnt trunk. She says she will only do that when he plants another tree in its place. He takes home the news of his father's leaving. Nobody says anything. Farkha comes to his room later and asks if he had seen his father. He says that Yadgar should look for his father because seeing him should be his father's only wish now. He also helps him look for his father by telling him where he could have gone. Yadgar wonders about his sincerity and intention of offering help. Is he atoning for his sin, or is he pretending to be good to win him over? Yadgar knew that as soon as he saw his sad face he could not accuse him of committing a sin. And he also knew that he did not want to bring his father back but he just wanted to see him and say goodbye.

Yadgar loves his mother. He might think she is guilty but he never feels that when he sees her or calls her 'mother'. He told her to live in the moment and not to think about the past.

On the third day after his father left he heard from a villager that a person has passed out in the village and is now in the village mosque. He immediately realizes that that must be his father. Who else could have passed out from misery and helplessness except for his father? Yadgar took off for the village immediately. He enjoyed the scenery and the hike in the mountains on his way to the village. Nothing bothered or concerned him. After he gets to the vicinity of the village, he encounters an old man who

is praying on a prayer slab by a pond. The old man tells him if he waits he will be met by the person he is looking for. Soon he sees a crowd of people carrying a coffin towards him. He is just surprised at his father's death. He sees his coffin off to the graveyard involuntarily.

Chapter 4

The Flower of Shoran

1

Las, the oldest son of Wisu Agha, returned home after fifteen years on the anniversary of his own death. Across the Qaybard plain which lies on the outskirts of the town his shadow stretched ahead of him, gradually fading into the darkness of dusk. He hurried so swiftly along a brook lined with maple and willow trees that he could not enjoy the croaking of frogs and the rustling of dry leaves under his feet. He hopped on the stepping rocks cautiously and entrusted his feet to a narrow path he saw after years through his senses but he was unaware that the path would pass by a new butcher's. The sound of his shoes dragging on the ground scared away the black ravens sitting around the butcher's. He flinched a little at their crowing and flight across a dark cobalt sky. Moments later a few stray dogs started to bark at him. He stopped, but without bending down for a rock to throw in their way resumed trampling on the path. The dogs seeing that he posed no threat dropped the stalking and went away. When he reached the first house in the town limits, he stopped, took a deep breath yearningly, and filled his lungs with the air of the town. During his short pause the lone minaret of a mosque caught his attention. Fifteen years ago none of the mosques enjoyed the luxury of a minaret. While extending the scope of his view, he shrugged. South of the mosque the town looked like a

line of houses whose interior lights illumined the background. Longing and impatient, he started to walk faster. The thought of returning home chased all his other thoughts away. As he turned into the first alleyway, he saw two men and a handful of children. Without attracting attention, he walked past them. A child at the end of the alleyway appeared and greeted him. He slowed down his steps and automatically began to examine him for a sign of acquaintance. He shook his head at his own act. He decided to let nobody and nothing stop him before he reaches home. He soon forgot about his resolution. As he walked he ran his eyes on the walls and now and then craned for a glance inside the lower windows. Like a naughty child imitating blind people, he rubbed his hand on the bricks and stones of the walls to pass from alley to alley. Soon his strides took him to the end of a dead-end alley. The last door brought him to a full stop. His heart also came to a momentary halt. When his breathing became normal and the spell-binding specter of the house broke away, he took a few steps back. He watched the gate and the wall as far as the light allowed him to see and craned to look over the courtyard wall. Only one of the rooms behind the wall was lit. A question raided his mind. It was about to make him nervous. But he didn't give it the chance. The steps he had taken back he took forward again. He raised his hand and slowly reached for the knocker. He recoiled immediately at the electrical shock striking his hand. For a second time, but more fearfully, he stretched his hand for the knocker. He hadn't touched it yet when a rustling sound from behind his back had him cringe. He turned around quickly. A shadow crept around the corner of the alleyway. He ignored it, grabbed the knocker, and knock...knock...knock. His heart jolted at each knock. His mind flew inside from over the wall. A mulberry tree stood in

the middle of the courtyard. The cage of two partridges hung from a branch and a leather bag of sour lassi from another. A small pond lay under it and a prayer slab on one side. He didn't hear any sounds approaching the door from the other side. He knocked again harder. Before long, like the eyelids of a sleeping person the door creaked open. The creaky sound ripped the silence in the alleyway. He stuck his head just inside the courtyard. A chubby child stood in silence behind the side of the door. A stinking smell like the smell of feces struck his nose.

“I am Las, the son of this family.”

He walked in without being invited to go inside. The foul smell melted away in the smell of soot and smoke. A night as far away as fifteen years and as close as a breath come to life. Before his eyes the house was on fire. The flames flared into the heavens. A wave of heat attacked him. He shielded his face with both his hands.

“Who is it, Hiwa?” someone hollered from inside.

The voice removed the image and doused the fire. He went towards the voice. He winced back at the silhouette of a standing bear. The mulberry tree used to stand there before.

“Who is it, Hiwa?” It was his mother who asked.

He ran up the stairs. “I am back, mother. I am back.”

He passed through the corridor. He leaned his worn shoulder against the frame of the door while a pale smile lit his face.

The old woman lifted her head. Her eyes climbed him from sole to crown. Then she shifted her gaze to his long shadow cast on the wall outside the door. Las's shadow was broken at three points. First at the line marking the ground off the wall; the second point was at the open door of the opposite room which had swallowed his shadow up to the chest; the third breakage was at the line separating the wall from the ceiling. The old woman pursed her lips.

“Who is this crooked tall man?” she might have wondered.

“Don’t you know me? Las? Wisu Agha’s oldest son, your own son!”

As if the old woman didn’t hear him or just took it for an untimely peeking of an old memory into the presence, she drew a sigh and gently shook her head. After she heard him for the second time, a chill swept through her body and made her lift her head further up. She squinted and gazed at the figure of the man standing on the threshold. The image of a plastic tube was projected on the screen of her mind; a thin neck and hollowed face. “Las?!” She felt like she was struck by a deadly punch. She was about to pass out. But she controlled herself and stared harder at him. She spotted a pair of sunken eyes that looked like two holes nesting timid insects. “Las, my son?!” she asked louder. Her gaze froze on Las’s face. Her body was motionless. She turned into stone for a moment. She didn’t know what helped her collect herself. She felt bitterness in her mouth as if she had

taken poison. She swallowed. She propped the palm of her hand on the ground and stood up. She walked to the window gently. She drew the curtain, which had been slightly open. It seemed like she was afraid of people peeking inside.

Still standing on the threshold, Las stared at his mother. He was confused. He thought he might have mistaken things. He compared the image he had in mind of his mother over fifteen years ago to this reserved old woman. They looked alike only enough to assure him that he was not mistaken.

“I have rubbed my muzzle against rocks and bushes like a dog to get myself here,” he said.

The old woman had her back towards him. A sense of resentment clutched her heart. She turned towards him a bit and said, “Las died long time ago.”

“But I am alive and I have come back. I have come back following my own bloodstained track,” he said before the smile left his face.

The old woman was not touched by that. “You are back?!” she asked the question with her eyes. Las read it as, “Why have you come back?”

“I have come back to be barked at and bitten by the dogs of my own land.”

The old woman returned to where she was sitting. She stretched her hand for the iron ewer.

“Las never aimed so low in life,” she said under her breath.

Las didn’t hear that. His knees loosened up. He could no longer stand on his feet. He slipped his shoulder off the door frame and took a step inside. He held on to the wall not to fall. He leaned his back against it and slowly collapsed.

The old woman saw the rising of thousands of questions in his eyes. She ignored him and started to fiddle with the iron ewer. He suddenly burst into tears. While sobbing, the sparrows of many questions fled the cage of his heart.

“Where are others, Khanzad, Yadgar, Farkha?”

Afraid of his mother’s answer, he didn’t dare stop crying. His body shivered with an untimely cold.

Previously, whenever Las expected bad news he took a pessimistic stance and braced up in advance for the worst to come. This was because he wanted to draw a sigh of relief after hearing the news and say, “Thank God that what I expected didn’t happen.” But now contrary to that he said to himself, “I wish what I thought would have happened in reality.”

At that moment his mother who had been speaking to him more than an hour about what had happened during the past fifteen years said, “Only Hiwa and I are living under the roof of Wisu Agha’s house.”

Las lifted his head up softly. He stared at his mother with awe. The old woman had grown much older during that short while. She was broken and worn as though she had just returned from an exhausting journey, as if all those hardships and disasters had happened to her during that passing hour. In spite of all this she did not stop talking as though she didn't feel that there was anyone present there. As if she was alone and recounted old memories. She sounded delirious. She passionately stretched the words. She repeated some of the words and sentences over like they echoed; especially when she said, "Only Hiwa and I."

Las shifted his eyes onto Hiwa's face. His mother's passionate narrative had attracted his attention too. His large head hung from his neck. He kept on chewing on his wrist and cried.

Las smelled the stench of feces again. He was disgusted and felt he wanted to spit. He had to look away and roam his eyes around the four corners of the room; four walls whose strokes of paint were still not completely covered by soot. A script of the Quranic verse *Ayatalkursi* was posted on the top part of the wall. Below that was Wisu Agha's dusty photo on the mantelpiece in the wall. He looked for his own photo. He didn't spot anything other than a radio, a Quran, and a few books on the other mantelpieces in the wall. He recognized his father's books, *Shahnamah*, a book of dream interpretation, and a book of *sharia*, Islamic law. A few plastic flowers were in a crystal vase on the small mantelpiece. Did they have those flowers and the vase before? He couldn't remember if they did. He wanted to know about Khanzad and their photo together. The photo had

been taken by the photographer Master Husain before their son, Yadgar, was born. He couldn't gather enough courage to ask his mother about it. He would ask about Farkha's photo as well if he could bring himself to do so. That photo was also taken the same day in the same room. That day they had insisted that Mother would also have her photo taken. His eyes were fixed on his mother's face. For the first time he wondered why she had grown so old. He thought all the wrinkles must have appeared on her face overnight. He wiped off the wrinkles from her face in his mind. His mother's eyes became bright, kind, and compassionate just the way they were in the past. This state did not last long. The whites of her eyes turned pale. Her eyelashes fell and her eyelids drooped.

His staring irritated her mother. Because of this sense of irritation or perhaps afraid that Las would ask more questions, she said, "I think I talked too much." Then while breathing hard in an effort to get up, she added, "You must be tired. Why don't you go and lie down in the other room?"

Las couldn't hide his delight at the indulgence that was granted. He got up in the way the hem of a worn-out jacket is snatched off the ground. Instead of going to the other room he went towards the roof of the annex. The shadow of the main house had entirely enveloped it. The moon had just appeared from the horizon. In order to see it he would have to go down the stairs and walk over to the other side of the courtyard. The silhouette in the middle of the courtyard which first appeared to him like a bear belonged to a burnt trunk. Its dark color sparkled under the moonlight. He circumambulated around it a few times in a ritualistic manner. He held his tears back. He wanted to hug it and stick his

heart to it. He could see his own heart which was like a slaughtered bird, like a clotted blood patch gummed to his ribs. He took a few steps in the opposite direction of it. He stood where he could see the moon right above the burnt trunk. Half of the moon's face was behind a piece of cloud, as though it was under the arm of a thief. He stared until the cloud hid it completely from his sight. The burnt trunk also stopped sparkling. The faint light from the two rooms, his mother's and the one he was supposed to sleep in, attracted his attention. This sight sat him down on a slab that served as a step in front of the outdoor oven. It made him cup his hand under his chin and took him back to the nights of his early childhood.

Las looked inside the room through the window. A primus burner burned on the steel base. The shadow of the guests magnified and stretched across the walls demonstrated a curious image of them. The guests were the wise men of the lower neighborhood. Sheikh Sala, Mullah Khalid, Haji Smail, and Mirza Hama Karim. They would be invited every time Wisu Agha returned from hunting. It was a feast, a nightly get-together, and a poetry contest, "...the king of the world I am, said the pen ... the pen-wielder thus I will lead into wealth...now letter 'm'." They had exhausted the letters A and B but the guests wouldn't give in.

Bored, Las had walked out of the room. He didn't like to sit in the lower side of the room but he wasn't allowed to sit by Uncle Nayer. Uncle Nayer sat at the top of the room by the window and dropped his head on his chest. The shadow of his beard reflected on the wall from the side trembled gently. Apparently he was talking to himself.

In an hour the guests would leave and the sitting room would be deserted. After that, Las went and sat by him, and said, "All right Uncle, time for telling the tale."

Uncle Nayer knew that Las had been waiting for a long time. He stroked his head by his white hand and asked, "Where did we stop last night?"

Las remembered and reminded Uncle Nayer where he had stopped. Uncle nodded and softly said:

"Khazal told Las,

What can I do? That will also cause me sorrow, I am the most unfortunate.

I have heard that there is flower of Shoran in Oman,

You won't need a light or candle; it will burn on its own till the next day.

"Las said,

Bring me the Shekhiz mare,

Bring me the Nazari spear with a couple of sharp daggers,

I will take to the dangers of the valley and the mountain,

Either I will lose my head or I will bring you the flower of Shoran.

"Lady Khazal said,

‘What could I have done? I am miserable and powerless,

I brought him the Shekhiz mare from the stable,

They took the saddle off her back,

and brought a sack,

that was crammed with sugared bread.

“Las said,

‘What do I need this sack for Lady Khazal?

Will you bring me the Nazari spear with blades on all sides?

I will not eat before I bring you the flower of Shoran.”

What was interesting was that although Las had a weak memory and things slipped from his mind easily he would remember the lines of the tale word by word such that even years later as if Uncle Nayer was in his mind; he told him, “All right Uncle, it’s time for the tale.” And Uncle would continue:

“Las said that the fight wasn’t between ewes but it was between rams.

“I am Las of Balakan and I have come after the flower of Shoran,

Either you'll fight me or you will desert the land of Oman and open the way for me.

"During the night they brought him forty stems of the flower of Shoran,

They had bunched them together and put them in Las's sack,

They were wrapped in fine silk."

It was no longer Uncle Nayer who told the tale. It was the tall Las of Balakan who was facing a fork in the road in the mind of Wisu Agha's young son, a one-day-long dangerous road and a four-day-long safer road. He picked the dangerous road; the road which passed through the land of the filthy. Suddenly he noticed an arrow coming at him; as he turned around and looked up he would see the attacker on the heights; he simply threw a spear at him and brought him down. Another arrow was shot at him and nailed his thigh to the saddle.

"I won't pull this out unless Khazal does it for me," he said and returned with the wound.

Uncle Nayer swayed his body as he told the story. He wasn't probably aware that his little listener also galloped his fury mare by shaking the rein in his imagination.

The next day when Las remembered that he dreamed of himself as a grown-up man with a handlebar moustache, asking the people of Oman for the flower of Shoran, he wondered, "which Lady Khazal will I dedicate the flower of Shoran to, if one day I

actually find it?” Uncle Nayer knew the answer. So he waited for him to return in the evening. Once Uncle Nayer walked over to the well to take his ablution for prayer when Las approached him and shyly said, “Last night I went and got a bunch of Shoran flowers.”

Uncle Nayer rubbed his hand against his beard, squeezed the water out of it, and said, “And?”

Las who didn’t expect such a question rubbed his palms against each other and murmured, “Well I got them.”

“So what did you do with them?” Uncle Nayer asked again.

Las remembered that he had got them, a bunch of red and yellow flowers. But...

“But I didn’t know what to do with them?”

Uncle Nayer gave him a sour face and said, “What about Lady Khazal? Why didn’t you give them to Lady Khazal?”

“Which Lady Khazal?”

Uncle Nayer looked on and sunk into his thoughts. He looked away and quietly said, “You should have given them to me.”

“To you?!”

“I would have given them to children. I’d give them one stem each and tell them this is from our handsome Las.”

But years would pass one after another before Las would have another dream in which he would bring home some more Shoran flowers and people would sadly say, “God bless you Uncle.” Just like when years later they said, “God bless you Las.”

During the fifteen years of separation from his family, Las had often thought that his family might have imagined it or heard it from someone; but he had never imagined that the news would be so easily taken as a fact of life.

“Fifteen years have passed; fifteen falls have stripped the trees of their leaves like this,” his mother said earlier that night.

Most of the time, although Las’s share of life had only been a patchy piece of sky, he had sensed the passage of time through frequent turning of days and nights, shifting of clouds, the loss of his physical strength, and the fading of some of his memories. Time passed very slowly by him. But he didn’t think time would also pass by in his own home and hometown. He didn’t think that his death would be taken for a fact just like that.

“Nobody doubted my death?” he had asked his mother.

“Other than...” her mother had said and cut herself short with a deep sigh.

“Other than who...?” Las had asked immediately.

“People believe more in death than life,” his mother had said.

So Las had died to prove that belief. A memorial service had been held for him. His imagined grave had been mourned over. Forty days after his death he had been remembered and mourned for and then forgotten just like every other dead person. His name had been scraped off their minds, memories, anything that belonged to him, and even his wife and his son.

“Now Las doesn’t own anything or have his name on anything so he shouldn’t have returned,” his mother had told him in tears.

Las was still sitting on the step in front of the outdoor oven. That night again, the assault of his mother’s words had annihilated his last base of confidence and resistance. Feeling more helpless than ever, he stared into the infinite darkness of the sky above. The stars had burnt out cluster after cluster before his eyes. The faintest one which he had claimed as his own had dissolved into the darkness earlier than all. A new subtle feeling formed in him quietly. Doubt speedily grew and clutched his entire being. “Could it be that I have really died?” Fifteen years of age spent waiting in agony turned into the flutter of a flying bird’s wings and the buzz of an invisible insect. He didn’t stop there and began to doubt his existence too. “Could it be that I am in someone’s dream or in a story?” This question made him scramble to his feet and madly run up the stairs and not stop before reaching his mother’s room. He walked to the mantelpiece, whereon sat his father’s books, picked up the Quran, took it out of its green wrapping cloth, and opened it. The verses didn’t attract his attention. He turned to the last page and there he found his

name and date of birth written in a beautiful handwriting, “Las...may he live long and may the purity of this Quran guide him through life.”

He looked at his date of birth. He had been born three days before the Russians set fire to the town.

“Las’s first cry might have come out because of the invasion of the occupying Russian army.” When Mother Guleh, his mother, years later talked about her memories of that time period, she said:

“The Russians occupied the town after the Ottoman Turks. People knew that they also had prepared themselves for carnage and feasting on the spoils of the town. Therefore, in a desperate effort they all gathered to come up with a solution to stop it from happening. Even Wisu Agha did not remember which of the whitebeards, wise men, and the masters had agreed to gather on that day. But he remembered, or maybe he later heard it from someone else, that all those who after the fatwa of a couple of mullahs went to Mindiawab to fight the Russian army and protect their faith and the caliphate sovereignty were nowhere around to be found. The wise whitebeards, those who were sure of themselves, had thought about what they could possibly offer the new occupier and what shame could make them retreat. Previously they had offered the Quran to the Caliph’s army, but they had claimed that the Quran of the Kurds was not correctly written and was invalid. Gallows had been erected and a few people had been hanged on such charges. One of the wise men had suggested they have the rabbi of the Jews lead their dispatch. The others had looked at one another. After a moment of staring at each other,

they had all nodded in agreement. The rabbi was not present in the gathering or I'd rather say he had not been called for consultation. In spite of this, they were all certain that he would not turn down their request and would give in to it. Why wouldn't he? He too lived in that town just like his father and forefathers had lived there. Even though he didn't share the same faith with them and many people had disrespected and cursed him, even though they had set mischievous kids at him on Saturdays to set fire to his loose hanging clothes, the rabbi was forgiving and wise enough not to forget this. That's why as soon as they notified him of their decision, he threw caution and fear to the wind and led them to the camp of the red-hair guests.

"By Peter the Great's head, the Ottomans have treated us so badly that the rabbi cried for us."

They said this to the Russians like school children singing in a choir. The rabbi, enjoying the self-confidence he gained from such attention, nodded his head in agreement and stepped forward to give his speech. But the Russians had no religious faith that would make them listen to his speech. So the group of wise men were ridiculed and kicked out.

The next morning or maybe on the same day, the red-haired and blue-eyed left their camp in lines towards the streets of the town to satisfy their greed and busted the doors of the houses. What they did embarrassed people so much that they didn't want to talk about it even years later. They would just draw a sigh and quietly say, "Good thing they decided early to burn down the town."

Wisu Agha's clan like the rest of the residents of the town packed up their stuff quickly, loaded it onto their mules, drove their cows out of the stables, and left the town.

Every time Mother Guleh reached this part of her memories of those days, she sadly said, "I was young and didn't care much that I had just given birth to a child. I didn't care about losing my new home belongings either. But the tragedy wasn't going to end before it stripped us of everything we had."

Here Las would use the opportunity given by her mother's sad silence to ask, "What else did it take from you?"

Mother Guleh swallowed the bitter saliva pooled up around her teeth, wiped away the drops of sweat from her forehead, and as though kneeling on the ashes of whatever she had in life, old memories came alive.

On a harsh and stormy day, they loaded their stuff onto mules. They were not alone. Two other families were in their company, the family of Rahman Agha, Wisu Agha's older brother, a simple person who had spent his entire life bending over sieves and scales. As much he as knew about the quality and weight of dates, raisins, beans, and wheat, he had missed out twice as much on learning about the ups and downs of life. Wisu Agha and he shared a God and a father and none other than that. They were not from the same mother. The only thing he had inherited from the patriarchal household of Wisu Agha's father was the title of Agha and had no claims to the reputation and grandeur that came with it. Khat Helaw, more pathetic than Rahman Agha, was a quiet,

clumsy woman. She also, like Khat Guleh, was recovering from giving birth to a baby. She carried a baby girl in her arms in addition to having two other snotty toddler boys. The second family was Khat Guleh's parents, an elderly couple. They had managed to raise only one boy and one girl out of fifteen children. The son had left them heartlessly so they had only Guleh to turn to for favors.

It was raining cats and dogs. The earth vomited water and the streams roared. They crossed the wooden bridge straddling the town river. But even the brooks and creeks around the town were all so full that shallow waters to cross were hard to find. Great numbers of burdened mules had tumbled. Women, children, and old people were stuck in mud. Mud had turned into a viscous sticky concoction and the stream banks were as loose as slime. The sky was dirty like a wrung muddy piece of rag. The screaming of children and the hollering and pleading cries of adults reached the high heavens. What Mother Guleh described sounded more like a scene from Armageddon. People were certainly not on their way to Heaven. They rather passed through one inferno to another, from one town doomed to burn to a place unknown. The caravan of Wisu Agha's clan reached Namashir in three stops, a tiny village located right on a road bound for a vast valley. It looked like a cold sore on the lip of a mountain.

"If we don't find a place to stay here, we'll be in trouble," Khat Guleh had suggested, apparently aware of an old friendship between Wisu Agha's father and Kiwekha, the village head.

“Do you think they will take guests?” Wisu Agha had asked, probably thinking that refusing to help on such a dark day wouldn’t come across as a terrible sin. Answering one’s pleading for help would have actually been courageous.

Kiwekha Habas was courageous. He stood strong among men. Loyal in friendship and family ties, he went to welcome them. He embraced Wisu Agha and stroked his chilled ear with his warm breath. Then he turned to Wisu Agha and said, “Don’t feel like you have nobody to turn to. Our storages are full of wheat and barley and millet. We’ll eat together as long as we have enough and then we’ll all together turn to God for help.”

The guests smiled. The horizon also cleared up and the earth displayed its fresh beauty.

“Prepare a room for them,” Habas Agha ordered his wife and children. Two rooms were cleaned up for Wisu Agha and his clan. Also, at the top of the living room, a cushion was placed with two pillows set on each other for him to recline.

Wisu Agha’s delight with this hospitality and courteous treatment didn’t last long. Contrary to what all sides expected, the phase of exile and vagrancy lingered on and as days passed by more discouraging news arrived. During such a war that raged across the world, the terrifying prospect of a famine with the advent of the winter of this region and the foray of a ferocious cold lurked large on the horizon. With the first snowfall, Kiwekha Habas opened the lid of the storages. The grain had sunken very low, much lower than in the past years. His face lost its color completely. “Woman, easy with the

grain. This year's winter will be recorded in books," his loud voice reverberated throughout all the rooms.

The women of Kiwekha's clan flinched. They might have flinched prior to that too. Women see things through the windows of men's eyes. Kiwekha's eyes had previously inspired fear too, but they didn't know what to do about it. How would have they taken it easy on the grain? What had they squandered anyway to stop it from happening in the future? Something crossed their minds and they locked the door.

"Knock, knock, knock..."

"We won't open the door. We can't feed anyone," whoever heard the door knock, said angrily.

Now homeless people snowed under with disaster swarmed the village. A couple left and four came in their place. Shame had been thrown to the wind; a hungry stomach should be fed after all.

Anyone who heard of a murder, breaking into a house, or a robbery would say, "A brave man will bring in a piece of bread for his family at any cost." Nobody cared about from whose children's mouths or which family that piece of bread would be snatched away. They all knew that in the inferno one wouldn't care about sinning. People in an inferno have already committed the sin and are punished for it. Although Kiwekha Habas didn't know anything about the guests' sins, he also didn't like to share their punishment. So he gave them a sour face. Wisu Agha thought to himself, if they were by themselves

they wouldn't mind leaving but they were not alone. They were comprised of five members of Rahman Agha's family and Guleh's parents, an elderly couple who had lately been shaking their dead forefathers in their graves over a piece of bread.

Over the years Mother Guleh had forgotten if she or Wisu Agha had first said, "I wish they would leave us alone."

Their souls withered as they said that. A sin grows out of a thought. They both gave in to the thought decisively and whispered to one another, "We should part ways. They should go their way and we'll go ours."

They said that with a sense of embarrassment because it felt like they had said, "We should sacrifice them and step over their dead bodies to save ourselves." Who are they? Father and mother, brother and nieces and nephews?

"We have to leave this place and you too," Wisu Agha said without thinking to put it in gentle words.

"What about us?" asked Rahman Agha turning to his wife, Khat Helaw. The mouths of both were agape. From their eyes fear hailed down on Wisu Agha and Khat Guleh's souls. In order too get out of that unpleasant situation, Wisu Agha turned away from them and approached his father and mother-in-law.

"We will leave you."

"What do you mean by we?"

“Guleh and I and this child.”

The old woman and the old man were too helpless to beg them and call upon God and the prophet to punish them. They lifted up their heads, stared at Guleh for a moment, and said, “Leave!”

That’s it? Even on the way, Khat Guleh could not get the thought out of her mind, “Go!” She wished they had said something more, anything other than that single word. The word was so heavy that she imagined it like a stone hitting her head and throwing her to the ground any time she remembered it.

They packed up their stuff and loaded it onto a mule. Khat Guleh and the child mounted another mule. Wisu Agha took a bundle of bread and his gun and drove a few sheep of his own out of the shelter. Then they said their goodbyes and took off.

“We left whatever we had at Kiwekha Habas’s door, father and mother, brother, niece and nephews,” mother Guleh used to say between sobs.

It was two days since the snow had stopped. The weather was cold and still, harsh and dry. The world was white, a clear white but in their eyes looked darker than the darkest of nights. The mountains from far off stretched in a row and crept away, gradually disappearing into the gray horizon marking the earth and the heavens.

Trudging through a stark khaki wilderness plagued with an absolute silence, bound for an ashy horizon, an unknown destination wrung Wisu Agha and Khat Guleh of

their last drops of confidence. After a long while of hopeless wandering, a feeling of loneliness arose in them for the first time, a bitter and dark feeling which was reminiscent of death, the death of the people of the town, the neighbors, the relatives, and more bitter than all, of their own death. Why hadn't they thought of that before? Why hadn't they been aware of that before? Maybe hardships hadn't allowed that. Maybe the pain of having to leave, abandoning their house, parting with all those things they had tried hard to hold together and were proud of, hadn't left them with any opportunity to think of it. Or maybe sharing the shame, the cold, fear, and hunger hadn't let them think of it. But now the fear of death was more terrifying than ever. Now death stalked them like a shadow, and even closer than that, like breathing. Yet they hadn't got used to its presence; they still had no acquaintance with it. They stole away from it and it teased them. It played hide-and-seek with them, sneered at them and laughed, ha...ha...ha.... They became more afraid of it. It wasn't like that previously. Before, death was right, "*Every soul tastes death,*" a verse of the Quran read. They shook their heads, drew a deep sigh, asked for God not to let them become invalids. Previously, death was just a word, a word with no significance. It was for the neighbors, for everyone except for them. But now death had turned into something else with ten dark and hard claws that their necks could actually feel. Any moment now; just wait if you don't believe.

Wisu Agha and Khat Guleh watched it in the vicinity of a village where a dark thin woman was tied to a tree. Her head was not tilted down. Her hair was frozen and stuck to the tree. Her eyes were wide open looking like two dead cats staring out of two open windows. It seemed like before she had died their eyes had stuck their gazes to the

village houses. The woman had dark, dirty skin which looked like the hide of a cow. Her dress was also frozen and didn't move in the wind.

"Who is that? Why's she tied to that tree?" they had asked in terror.

Apparently, the day before, she had become so starved that she had killed her own child.

"She killed her child?"

She was barbecuing a piece of meat from her child's body and was eating it when they caught her. Apparently the people of the village had beaten her up first and then taken her to the house of the village head. He had had her tied to the tree so that she would freeze in the cold. Only God knew when she had died.

Now death had such a look, an evil creature with a thousand of hands and legs which appeared in different guises each moment.

They stopped in Bilasan at the foot of Mount Bilu. They were accommodated again by an old friend of Wisu Agha's father, a thin, red-skinned Sufi. They stayed there as guests until the end of that year. They kindled the Nowruz fire on their roof and had the first sprouts of *Gelakha* with them. It was then that Wisu Agha thought about going back to town.

The Russians had left the area. When their government fell, all of their troops had headed back to their country. Like the other residents of the town, they also had to return

to the home that they had left in flames. They had to go back, restore their houses, and then look for their missing family members. Wisu Agha and Khat Guleh were sick with worry over their families throughout the winter. They had to find them and put an end to their painful suffering. Were they dead or alive? They had asked this question of one another a thousand times.

When Sufi found out about their decision, he said to Wisu Agha, "You're a man. You go and look for them and let this woman stay here with her baby."

Sufi was a knowledgeable man. He knew well that it wasn't a good idea for a woman with a baby to be left alone without a man watching over them in the anarchic commotion of the town.

"Commotion?!"

Wisu Agha flinched at that word first but soon realized that the burnt rubble of the town might not be left alone yet. The nomads must be dancing and ululating over it. Wisu Agha followed Sufi's advice. So he hit the road before returning to town. His expedition took a few months. When he returned he had brought back only Khat Helaw and her baby with him. Before hugging and crying over them, Khat Guleh asked, "What about my father and mother?"

Her father and mother had died in the cold by a village four days after they had left them. The people of the village had taken shreds of an old couple's clothes and kept

them for identification of the bodies. Wisu Agha had identified them, but he hadn't claimed them.

"What can I say? If I say they were my father and mother-in-law, wouldn't they ask what they were doing there in the cold all alone?"

Wisu Agha didn't tell Khat Guleh about this. Nor did he tell Khat Guleh that the people of the village had pulled the bodies of the old couple out of the village dogs' jaws. He didn't tell Khat Guleh that three dogs had torn each other in the fight over the dead bodies. He had many other things that he never told Khat Guleh. Khat Guleh still thinks that her father and mother died from illness inside a mosque in Garmian village, like lots of other people and many of their close and distant relatives. What she believed to have happened to her parents was what happened to Rahman Agha and his two little sons, a story that Helaw never shared with anyone.

It was midsummer when Wisu Agha said his farewells to Sufi for a second time. The grass had turned yellow and stiff like dry straw. A man with two women and two children, a mule as the only left-over of their journey, and a few rugs and bed rolls, he set off towards the town, a town that held thousands of hidden secrets in its heart and remembered many events, it was a battlefield where an eternal war waged, a town whose Jewish residents were the only ones still on their feet. They also awaited a day the Kurdish army would put fire to their lives in a blind rage as a reaction to an occupying army.

They walked down from the Mamostayan Spring towards the plain where the town lay. The plain was yellow and reeked of nothing but horse urine, a plain that bore many trails of galloping horses. The river was shallow. They crossed it. The smell of carcasses and soot increased. They passed by mounds of rubble of tumbled houses, by places that were narrow alleyways frequented by people, alleyways that reached a place that was once a house Wisu Agha had inherited from his forefathers, a house in the middle of a small town, the last house at the end of a blind alley replete with memories of generations following one another, a house full of colorful dreams of children. Previously one could see its windows from over the courtyard wall which couldn't hide them. Now the wall had tumbled over and turned into a mound of rubble. Who dared to cross it? Wisu Agha, who had more self-assurance, went over the wall. The rest followed him, without crying, whimpering, or even sighing. As they climbed the mound, the smell of fire residue struck their noses. The mulberry tree that used to stand in the middle of the yard was burnt. Its thick trunk had turned into coal. It was beyond their memory when the tree was planted but its destruction grieved them more than anything that had happened to them in that year. "What is that?" their grieved eyes turned white out of shock and surprise. A scream rolled up inside their chests and came out with the question, "What's that?" A young shoot seemed to have sprung out of the heart of the burnt trunk. But it was a foot away from it, a fresh baby shoot. Someone was lying under it. He had a pair of *giveh* shoes under his head. He had folded his knees into his stomach; he looked like a fetus in his mother's belly. Wisu Agha awoke him. The man got up and dusted off his

clothes. An old man with a snowflake white beard and a clear forehead said with a smile that lit his face even in his sleep, “Are you back? Welcome back then.”

“May good come your way. Who are you?”

“A slave of God. They call me Nayer.”

“Where are you from?”

The smile spread over his face like a splash of clean clear water. “I am from here now.”

“From here?”

“All right, I will be a guest here.”

The man spoke gently, so gently that his words touched the soul of the listener. Where did he come from? Why and how had he arrived there? And they asked no other questions.

“I was walking on the roofs of ruined houses before this burnt tree stopped me. I had a shoot of mulberry which I planted. I couldn’t leave it alone, so I watched it. I have watered it every day and awaited your return. What is that baby boy’s name?” he asked.

Wisu Agha stared at the baby in Guleh’s arms and kept his eyes there for a moment as if he hadn’t seen him before, “His name?”

“Yeah, yeah...God he is handsome.”

What was the name of Wisu Agha’s only child? Nobody knew. The boy...this boy...this child...they hadn’t thought that a child needs a name. Khat Guleh put down the child on a mound of rubble and took a step back. The child took a handful of dust in his hand. The old man walked towards him and picked him up.

“Maybe his name is Las?!”

“Yes, it’s Las. His name is Las.”

Wisu Agha confirmed it without hesitating. But why Las? He never asked that question.

“A child is a child and a name is a name. Let it be Las. It’s very pretty.”

While attracting Wisu Agha’s attention towards himself, the old man asked, “Is that child in the bosom of that poor woman related to you?”

“She is my niece.”

The smile on the old man’s face grew into a laugh, a gentle laugh Wisu Agha had been missing from the people around him for quite a while.

“Khanzad, her name is Khanzad, right?”

That day nobody questioned anything; but years later when the girl grew up, he would be asked, “Why Khanzad, Uncle? Wasn’t Khazal prettier?”

He would take a deep breath and quietly say as if to himself, “Khazal?...yes Lady Khazal...”

Then they gave up on the question without getting an answer.

Their first delight upon their arrival at their home was the two babies’ names. A few days later, one of the names was printed on the back of the large Quran.

“Las...may he live long and may the purity of this Quran guide him through life.”

2

A soothing shaft of soft light came in through the thin curtain hanging over the window and awoke Las. It was the first morning after his return. His eyes roamed over the line of timbers in the ceiling and drooped over to the wall opposite him. He still didn't realize where he was. He looked around the entire room in confusion. He sat up as he remembered where he was. Last night he had forgotten to take off his turban before lying down. His hat had fallen off his head and the sash was wrapped around his neck. He put it back on his head and crept towards the window. He drew a corner of the curtain aside and saw the sky. He got up and drew the curtain aside completely. The courtyard lay there as his view. Mother Guleh was on the prayer stone. It was clear she had woken up some time earlier. He remembered that in the earlier years as well she'd always wake up before everyone in the neighborhood. He went out onto the roof of the stable annex and swelled out his lungs. He inhaled the scent of wet earth in the cold air. He lifted his head and saw the sun spreading her locks over the horizon. The cold of a long fall night shattered like crystal. Each shred of it pricked his face like the sting of a provoked wasp. The silhouette of the town had changed with the view he got from where he stood. What had stayed intact was Mount Arbaba, which stood there like a huge rocky lion. His claws were in the heart of the earth and his back leaned against the sky. Las felt a sense of happiness for the first time in years. He wondered why he felt that way. As soon as his gaze was shaken off

the view, a sense of despair overwhelmed his soul. “Why am I here?” the question took shape in his mind. The day before at the same time he had a thousand reasons for his return but now he couldn’t think of a single one. A thought he had avoided the night before came back to him, “I’d better leave just the way I came.” Where to? Beyond his return, a small square corner of the sky behind six bars was the only view he could remember. In the entire world he could not think of a patch of land to rest in except for here. But now even here wasn’t the place of rest.

“Nobody knows you. Nobody believes in your existence. Wherever else you’re alive, you’re dead here,” his mother had told him the night before with such certainty that Las had begun to have doubts. Throughout that long night while tossing and turning in his bed he had recalled his father and mother’s stories. He had gone over the years around his birth and his naming ceremony to reassure himself that once upon a time a boy by the name of Las had been reared by Wisu Agha and Khat Guleh. “Am I the same boy?” now he wondered. His mother, indirectly though, denied that he was. So he had to prove his identity and existence. This thought crossed his mind like an unfunny joke. Still that could be the excuse for his stay, the excuse for his sojourn there to look for his past and to prove his presence, to understand his life, to find out about the lives of the people and things that were once part of his life. This thought, to some extent, drove back his sense of despair and brought him back the happiness he had experienced moments before.

Mother Guleh was still sitting on the prayer slab motionless as though she was part of the stone or she was a statue. But the statue moved and rose. Las thought she had

grown older than the night before. He hadn't paid attention to her gait the night before. Now he saw her limping as she walked. She walked up the stairs with difficulty. She planted her gaze at her feet. Obviously, she wanted to avoid Las's eyes. Las would be naïve to think his mother avoided him because she felt embarrassed that she had treated him coldly the night before. But that was one of the things he wanted to believe. He took a step towards her and to attract her attention said, "Have you been up long?"

Mother Guleh passed by him ignoring him. Las dropped his head and followed her. Inside the room, Hiwa had gathered his knees into his stomach under the blanket. Las pointed to him with his eyes and asked, "He doesn't wake up early, does he?"

"Wake up to do what? Chew on his wrist?" Mother Guleh said coldly.

Las remembered that the night before Hiwa kept chewing on his wrist until he fell asleep. His mother had told him that he was retarded, but he didn't ask why he chewed on his wrist. He wanted to ask her but had changed his mind and said, "Wrap his wrist in a piece of cloth. Last night I noticed him chewing off the skin on his wrist."

Without answering, Mother Guleh poked Hiwa's side with her toes, "Wake up...wake up...it's morning."

Hiwa, who was obviously a light sleeper jolted up, roamed his eyes around and paused them over Las's face. He looked confused, as if he didn't remember he had seen Las the night before. Unlike the night before, his gazing didn't seem to be undisturbed. It was sharp and lunatic. Las realized that it was Hiwa who made him think of feces. For

the first time, he thought he didn't like him. He felt he even disliked him, maybe because of his large wide open eyes that didn't express anything or were blank enough only to express surprise for a brief moment. Hiwa turned to his mother and while yawning asked, "Why, is it too late?"

Mother Guleh didn't answer so he had to continue, "No, it's not that late. The store isn't closed."

Las realized that that was what Mother had said to him before and now he rehashed it. Unlike last night, Hiwa seemed to be in a better mood. He held his hand out toward Las and asked his mother, "Who is that?"

Mother Guleh shook her head in frustration and got up. Hiwa saw her off out of the door with his gaze. Then he turned to Las and asked, "Who are you?"

Las wasn't in the mood to talk to him but he said, "I am Las, your older brother." This piece of news didn't leave any impression on Hiwa's face. He didn't say a word. He just got up, went around the room once, and walked out. Las watched him from behind and realized he wasn't as plump as he had appeared to him the night before. His mother came back inside.

"I thought he was dumb, but he is actually talkative," Las said.

Mother Guleh poured two cups of tea and said, "Yes, he is talkative."

“You didn’t say what happened to him. He wasn’t like that when he was little, was he?” Las said.

Mother Guleh lifted her head up and stared at him. She wanted to ask, how do you know he wasn’t like that when he was little? “He was fine for the first four or five years or we didn’t realize that something was wrong with him. But since then he has got worse day after day,” she said instead.

“He doesn’t let you know?”

“No, he beats himself when he gets uneasy.”

“He beats himself?!” Las wondered, “But then why is it that he chews on his wrist?”

“He’s developed the habit.”

“Wrap his wrist. His skin is almost gone,” Las suggested again.

“Does he disgust you?”

Las was taken off guard by his mother’s question but tried not to show it, “No, I feel pity for him.”

“Pity?!” Mother Guleh asked sarcastically.

Hiwa came back inside. He had rinsed his face and hands. Las stopped talking and started to eat. "Mother was kinder last night," he thought as he ate. He then stole a glance at her face, "What is that bitterness taking hold of her?" He thought the Devil had broken into her withered body. He sensed the Devil's presence in her broken body. He didn't allow himself to follow up with the thought. Another analogy came to his aid, "She looks like a conquered castle." He liked this one better. As a child he had listened to Uncle Nayer tell him lots of stories about such castles. That meant he had to conquer it and search it. He had to find out what was going on on the other side of that careless face and that lifeless expression hanging over it. Las's gaze didn't go far, and ran headlong into a wall of ice standing between him and his mother, between his presence and past. The past that Las was after and his mother avoided. His mother was quiet. That irritated Las. He didn't know how long that silence would last. He stopped eating. Mother Guleh poured him a cup of tea and asked in a helpless manner, "Will you go out?!"

Till that moment Las hadn't thought about that. Should he go out? There was no easy answer to that. Outside meant the town with all of its entire people, all those who had known him and cried at his death, and those who had never known him or heard of his name. He was dead to both. But he could revoke that feeling and assumption; he could go out and say, "I am Las, the oldest son of Wisu Agha, alive. I am back."

Then what? Las had no answer to that. He could live a normal life among them and not be concerned about anything. He could also go after all the pieces of his past life

and find them each somewhere. He could do many other things. Today was the first day after his return. He had to postpone further mulling over it to another day.

“Go out to do what? Where would I go?” he asked.

A small joy swept through Mother Guleh’s heart that her face wasn’t able to avoid showing. Las felt it and snatched it, “I’ll go out if you’d like me to.”

That obviously gave Mother Guleh the shivers.

“No, no, why would I like you to do that?” Then she realized she’d been scared of Las going out since the night before.

“If you want my opinion, I’d never want you to go outside.”

Las knew the reason but still asked, “Why?”

“Why!?” Mother Guleh repeated Las’s question in astonishment. After what they had said to each other the night before, she didn’t expect that “why.”

Las asked why again. He was ready to ask it a thousand times more “Why? Why? Why?” Why shouldn’t he be alive and back? Why shouldn’t he go out? Why would his mother hide him from people? On what charges would he have to stay confined forever?

Charges? That word reminded him of what his mother had told him the night before. There were charges. His charges were that Wisu Agha’s clan had lost its lofty place. When? Years ago, those years when Las wasn’t home, those years when Las was

dead. His brother Farkha, his wife Khanzad, and his mother Mother Guleh, all of them had a part in it except for him. That's what Las believed. All the culprits were alive, lived in town and among people. But he had to be dead, and not go to town so people wouldn't see him. Why?

Mother Guleh didn't want the family secrets unveiled. She didn't want again to have other people turn their lights off on them. She didn't want Las to realize the truth of the matter.

That approach was silly to Las, but he had to take advantage of it. "We'll negotiate if that's the case," he thought to himself. "If you stay quiet like that, I'll lose my patience and go out," he said.

Mother Guleh realized and bit her lip. "Do you want me to sing a song to you?" She said.

Las didn't back down and said, "Don't sing to me. Talk to me. Let me know what has happened to us."

At that moment Las was thinking to himself that now that his fifteen-year-old dream has not come true, and his house of dreams is in ruins, he has to search the rubble. That was not much to ask but it drained his stamina. Again he felt the amount of longing he had for finding out about that lost part of his life. That's why he asked, "One third of my life is with you, one third of my destiny. Give it back to me so I know where I am coming from and where I am headed."

“That’s it?” Mother Guleh asked quietly. She seemed to have expected something else. She didn’t understand herself. Before Las stands up, she stared at his hands. Those hands begged for the pages of their own history.

Las got up. He walked to the window. The sun had spread its rays in all directions.

In front of the window that day, Las was a sad man who after years past his death, after years of waiting in the long hallway of limbo had been sentenced to come back secretly to this world and from inside and through that window look back on his life. He didn’t know if that was retribution for a cardinal sin and torture in hell or a reward for a good deed and a heavenly pleasure. He only knew that in either case he felt he had made a choice.

Other than having a few dim and distant pictures which like certain black and white pictures inside some album do not trigger any memory, Las’s oldest memory was of an evening. He came back from school wearing a pair of blue pants and a small cap and put his books down by the mulberry tree inside the courtyard and climbed the stairs. There was a wooden cradle on the roof of the stable annex. He stuck his head under the coarse goat-hair cloth covering the wooden cradle and rubbed his lips over the baby’s cheeks and neck in the dark and kissed him. The baby jolted out of sleep and began to cry.

"At least draw the cloth aside when you are kissing him," Mother Guleh hollered from the courtyard.

Las was sated from kissing him. He drew his head back out and while wiping his mouth with the back of his hand faked a feeling of disgust and said, "I can't kiss him if I see his face."

The baby was a little flushed boy. His eyes were as tiny as two grains of barley. If you saw him, you would realize that he was less than forty days old. After he was born, he had been swaddled up and on his mother's request taken to Uncle Nayer under the mulberry tree. "Whisper the prayer call into his ear, Uncle."

Although Uncle Nayer's breath was blessed and usually came up with good names for children, this time he had refused to do so. After he had slightly placed his lips on his cheek and prayed for him in good faith, he had sent him back. "Let's put off his name to another day. I can't think of any names now."

It was odd that Uncle Nayer couldn't think of a good name. But he could not be forced into doing it.

"Maybe Uncle Nayer knows something we don't. Maybe the baby is not going to live," Mother Guleh had expressed her worries.

"Life and death are only known to God," Wisu Agha had said mockingly.

"But why didn't Uncle name him then?" Mother Guleh had asked.

“Besides Las and Khanzad, what other child has Uncle named?” Wisu Agha had shaken his head at her sarcastically.

Mother Guleh knew that but still had her doubts.

“Prepare some beef and Kifta, I’ll name him myself,” Wisu Agha had said.

He had named him Farkha. That was in a way copying Uncle Nayer and referencing to the folktale of Sheikh Farkha. Uncle Nayer had congratulated them on that.

After leaving Farkha alone, Las returned to the courtyard. Mother Guleh left her work and asked, “How was school?”

Las stood up straight in front of her and in a manner he thought was manly said in Persian, “Speak Persian.”

That’s what he did every day. Mother Guleh knew it was the government’s order written on a piece of paper posted over the school door. She even knew that on many nights a policeman with a handlebar mustache came to his dreams and reminded him of that. But Las made fun of it. He would gather all the children in the neighborhood around himself, took a strap and imitating Mullah Rahman, the school teacher, said in Persian, “Without a strap in hand, donkeys and bulls don’t follow orders.”

The children ran away and he chased them.

“Out of all these children, you have to chase me down?” Khanzad said crying and sulkily walked away to home.

Las went after her. Fearful of his mother and afraid to break his aunt Helaw’s heart, he grabbed her hand and said, “We’re just playing. You shouldn’t be upset and cry.”

“You hate me,” Khanzad said sobbing. She then yanked her hand out of his grasp and sped up his pace.

Las tried hard to make amends but Khanzad didn’t give in. He had to let it go and join the children again.

Around evening, Uncle Nayer expected Las and Khanzad to go welcome him home as usual. But they hung their heads in guilt and shame each in a corner of the courtyard. Uncle Nayer glanced at them from the corner of his eyes. Before he would start to talk to them, Mother Guleh said, “Don’t worry about them Uncle. They need to be punished.”

“Don’t tell me they have fought again?” Uncle Nayer said.

“They have turned into cats and dogs. They don’t get along anymore.”

“So they are going to miss this evening’s walk?” Uncle Nayer asked.

Las and Khanzad stole a glance at each other from the corner of their eyes. Their eyes were reproachful. Feeling disappointed, they looked down again. Uncle had promised them the night before to take them with him on a walk. And they had looked forward to his early return since dawn.

Uncle Nayer took the saddle off the back of the donkey and said, “I wouldn’t have come home early if I knew that.”

The kids lost hope and grew sad. Uncle Nayer turned to Mother Guleh and said with a smile, “How would I take with me two kids who have gotten into a fight and don’t talk to each other?”

Mother Guleh was about to talk when Uncle motioned to her with his eyes to be quiet, “I wish they’d make up so I wouldn’t have to miss the walk.”

The kids burst out crying. Uncle Nayer approached Las, grabbed his hand, and slowly walked him towards Khanzad. “By the time they make up and wash their faces, I’d be ready too.”

As if they had never had a fight, Las and Khanzad poured water on each other’s hands.

Usually on the evenings when Uncle Nayer returned home early, he would take the kids on a stroll outside of town.

That evening too, after making their way out of the town through the alleys and backstreets, they passed through the corn and tobacco fields. Through the vineyards across Mirza Beg Creek, they climbed the slope of Mount Arbaba. They strolled from vine to vine and observed the clusters of grape hiding under the shivering shade of the grape leaves, some amber and golden, some ebony. From the vineyard of a friend of Uncle Nayer's, they picked two clusters of rare Chawqulke grapes, put them in a piece of cloth, and weaved their way on a narrow path running under the shade of pear and peach trees to the owner's spring and pond. The path stretched along a fence that was made of dry bushes and twigs. They sank the grapes in the water to cool and sat in the shade of the trees.

Years later Las and Khanzad would look back at how, during the course of these strolls, they learned to enjoy nature and its beauties, to feel the change and difference of the seasons, to listen to the music of running water in the brooks, to soothe the fair and tender skin of their faces with cool spring water. Uncle Nayer would show them the sky, and the evening sun which was about to set behind the mountains. He would ask them to pay attention to the songs of birds hiding in tree branches, the dance of the leaves, and the flutter of birds, the shadows of whose little wings they could only see for seconds.

They were not too tired to need a long break. The grape bunches were still under the water that ran down the spring water spout. Las and Khanzad could not wait anymore, and there were again their secret glances, whispers, and smiles at one another.

“You tell him,” Las asked.

Khanzad bit her lip out of embarrassment and said, “No, you tell him.”

Uncle Nayer realized and turned to Las with a smile and said, “Instead of murmuring why don’t you go and get the grapes so we can head back home earlier.”

Las walked to the spring. The grapes were sparkling under the running spring water. He fished out the clusters. The drops dripping from the grapes looked amber and golden. He couldn’t help himself anymore and put one in his mouth. As he pressed it under his teeth, a sweet juice squirted into his mouth. Overcome with joy, he suddenly and without thinking, hugged Uncle Nayer and said with a childish laugh, “I love you, Uncle.”

Uncle Nayer pressed him to himself and from his fast heartbeat felt the presence of an innocent love, a love that had been created for him there in his small world. “I love you too,” he said. Then he turned to Khanzad. She too looked at him with the same kind of love. He opened his arms to her too and said, “I love you both.”

There was sadness in his voice that Las didn’t sense. Because other than love, Las didn’t know anything else, didn’t feel anything of grief or resentment. Las was still a child. He had years to go before he would experience and understand such things. Predicting the future was not difficult for Uncle Nayer. He might have been able to foresee the days Las returned from school with his friends, and as usual walked down the upper neighborhood along the big brook, and at the suggestion of one of the friends walked in the direction of the Graveyard of the Anonymous. They didn’t stay there long

and turned in the direction of Flowers Spring. Before they reached there, they saw a lot of people gathered at the spring. They ran towards the crowd. They stood aside and listened. That didn't satisfy them and each weaved his way in through the crowd. All they heard were curses and abuse. Apparently there was a fight. Las looked around a lot but he could not find anyone trying to assault anyone else. It looked like the fight was over and the fighters had done their beating and made peace. But the onlookers didn't want to leave the battle field. Las here and there heard the name of widow Amah a few times. "Poor Amah...A rug is torn from its worn side... poor widow...takes care of a bunch of children and..." Fatah, Khat Amah's son came to his mind immediately. Fatah was one of the neighborhood's naughty kids. Las was sure something had happened to him. It was quite a while since he had last seen Fatah. Before thinking about how long ago he had seen him, he remembered he had once heard someone say Fatah would get himself into a big trouble someday. He didn't mind that much. Fatah was the only guy in the neighborhood who would pick fights with him. "Let's hope he is not dead," he heard someone say. His body shuddered at that. "I hope he isn't knifed," he said to himself. He did not know why the idea of getting knifed popped up in his mind. Suddenly the crowd split and a woman carried like a dead body in the arms of a man appeared. "That must be Khat Amah who's passed out," he said to himself again. He craned to see when his head was elbowed. He didn't mind it. He stared to see the woman. It wasn't Khat Amah. It was her daughter, Nazdar, Fatah's older sister. Las had seen her before over their courtyard fence when she was unraveling fleece. She seemed to be taller with her legs dangling over the guy's arms. She had hidden her head behind the guy's arm. Las looked into the

guy's face. He was so mad that he scared him. The guy took fast and steady steps and the crowd followed him. "What's happened to Fatah?"

He asked his question loud enough and expected to get an answer. He looked around for his friends and didn't find any of them. He went after the guy faster. The crowd was getting bigger. Whoever arrived asked, "What's going on?" Anyone who was in the mood of telling answered, "The bastard Officer Hussein called her names and took off her head scarf." He called her names in broad daylight? The image of their amber cow getting mated came back to him. Before hearing the entire story, he had already started to hate Officer Hussein and what he did. A guy by the name of Hamah Rashid whom Las didn't know was interested in Nazdar. "He was a junky bum," people said of him. Apparently, he stopped her on the way to the spring a few times. "Poor girl" didn't know what to do, so she just spat at him. After that the guy sent people to ask for her hand in marriage for him. "I wouldn't even want him to help carry her coffin away," Khat Amah had said. Bearing a grudge, he had bribed Officer Hussein to corner her somewhere and strip her off her clothes and disgrace her. Apparently, Officer Hussein sat her in ambush for a few days and today got the chance to go at her on the way to the spring. After he took off her head scarf, he grabbed her hair, tried to tear off her clothes. Nazdar screamed in terror and passed out. "She is terrorized and dead," Las heard them say. He thought of Fatah. He helped his mother in the mornings to bring home loads of logs and firewood and in the afternoons he set dogs at the children in the neighborhood. "Where could he be now?" Las wondered.

He walked shoulder to shoulder with the guy and stared at Nazdar's thin and bony legs. Khat Amah, sad and panic-stricken, appeared from the turn of the back alleyway. She began to scream as soon as she saw the crowd and saw that Nazdar was unconscious. She probably thought Nazdar was dead. Her screams echoed in the tight alleyway and sent a shock wave through the crowd. Las took a step back but the pressure from the crowd pushed him to the front again. Before Khat Amah reached the crowd, her knees buckled and she collapsed. Next she started to pour the dust and earth around her on her own head. A couple of men walked to her and grabbed her hands. Las also approached her. Her face was distorted and red from screaming. It struck him as strange. How could a human's face, a woman he had seen a hundred times, so suddenly become this ugly and scary? Her eyes stood out like two rotten grapes, and her mouth was so wide open that it covered her entire face. He couldn't understand how those frequent and frightening screams came out of that tiny thin body. Las swallowed. The men put Khat Amah's head scarf, which had fallen off, back on her head, and tried to calm her down. "Don't worry. She is just scared. "Don't make such a racket...she has passed out...shut up...leave her, poor thing...on the way...don't scare her...shame on you...God will..." Khat Amah didn't seem to hear any of that. She lay stretched on the ground.

A few men lifted her up and helped her across the trampled fence. When Nazdar was also taken out of the sight of the crowd, a low voice alarmed them. "What if the police come after us?" People got scared. It was time for a white-bearded man to step in. "Please disperse. Leave, may God bless you all." The crowd was reluctant to leave but out of fear they split up and walked away. Las didn't want to leave. He sat on a rock by

the fence. Khat Amah's frightening screams had subsided into quiet moaning over a dead body. "Is she dead?" Las wondered. A strange feeling made him drop his head on his chest. He didn't know how long he stayed that way. Fatah's hollering alerted him. Fatah rushed into the courtyard like a mad man, his face as white as a ghost. They didn't let him into the house before he stopped hollering. Moments later most of the men and women who were inside the house came out. Khat Amah's cries and moaning weren't about to stop. Fatah raised his voice again. They made him leave the room, perhaps because of his annoying voice. He came into the courtyard crying. He looked over those who hadn't left yet. Las's face caught his attention. For a second he shut his mouth and then started all over again. Las couldn't help it anymore and burst out crying and dropped his head on his chest again. His shoulders shook with sobbing. Mother Guleh whom Las hadn't noticed come, stroked his head, "Get up, son, and go home."

Khanzad, looking sad, was in their house sitting on the stairs leading to roof of the stable annex. As soon as Las opened the door and entered the courtyard, she strode towards him and asked, "What happened to Nazdar?"

It was almost a year since Khanzad had been banned from leaving the house. On one of his visits to their house, Wisu Agha had said, "You shouldn't go out of the house anymore."

Khanzad who then couldn't even tell apart left from right had wondered, "Why, uncle?"

Wisu Agha had angrily responded, “No questions. Only from this door to that door, other than that you won’t go anywhere else.”

He had then whispered to his sister-in-law, Khat Helaw, “Officer Rashi has seen her here and there. He told me himself, if it wasn’t for us, he would strip her and we will lose our face.”

“Poor thing! I don’t think she will live,” Las said unhappily.

That night Wisu Agha and Uncle Nayer also went to Khat Amah’s home. Nazdar had gained consciousness but couldn’t be calmed at all. She hid herself in a corner of the room and kept screaming and crying, “Please help me...they’re taking me away...they’ll kill me.”

Although Wisu Agha had confidently assured them, “That’s not something to worry about; she’s just scared. She’ll get well by tomorrow.” But Nazdar did not get well and stayed mad.

The first sign of hatred that formed in Las after Nazdar became disturbed was the spit he threw at Officer Hussein in his imagination, “You bastard.” Gradually over years Officer Hussein’s face faded in his memory. What was transfixed in his imagination was a man in uniform with a cap bearing the emblems of the Lion and the Sun. A faceless police, the hollowness of the face was occupied by a different face every hour and after each incident. Therefore, Las’s hatred was towards all government officials, including sergeants, officers, and even Reza Shah himself with his handlebar mustache and wide

open eyes whose picture was on the first page of all school textbooks. The government spread the most deadly microbe in the entire town. Fear ran from the main military base through the town's veins, down the straight dirt road, the winding and narrow backstreets into the courtyards of houses, and the hearts of each and every resident of the town; fear of imprisonment, getting beaten up and killed; fear of losing face and mind. This bitter experience expanded the young Las's world as far as the town. Las gradually got to know the town. The stark reality sank in; a deserted town, silent and saddened under the dark shadow of guns and threats, and the government's backward laws; guns for killing and protecting the shadow; threats to enforce the law of discarding Kurdish clothes and wearing fashionable clothes instead; the law of forcing people to stop observing their traditions.

It was in those days that Las finished ninth grade and had to quit school. The only thing about quitting school that made him happy was the chance to get rid of pants and to get the freedom of wearing the Kurdish attire, *Ranku Chokhar*. By doing so, he felt a sense of heroic rebelliousness in himself, just like the young men of the stories who were not frightened by anything.

His father, who was an employee of the government's finance office, had begun to obey the law early on. His father's friends, even those who were not government employees did not dare to wear Kurdish clothes. Most of the shop-keepers and the bazaar people also had a pair of pants and a hat ready by their stock. Even those who had not obeyed the law and still wore Kurdish clothes did not look anything like heroes. They hid

themselves behind the wooden shelves in the back of their stores and expected police to come in on them any minute and ask, “Where is your hat? Where are your pants?” And then they would have to beg for mercy and the police would get angry and swear, “You disobedient bastards.” Las did not consider that disobedience and rebellion. It only disgusted him that people begged the police and kissed their hands and still had to be disrespected, beaten up, and ridiculed.

Las had witnessed all of this with his own eyes. Even now after years of longing to go out around the town through its streets and backstreets, he still remembered the day when his father sent him to Hajj Baba’s house in the upper neighborhood to get him the book of *One Thousand and One Nights*. He put the book which was wrapped in a cotton piece under his arm and walked in the street by Khan’s Mosque towards the Straight Street. A hollering caught his attention and he fastened his pace. Officer Rashi shouldered a short man and took him out of his shop. People in the shops around were all on their feet but didn’t dare interfere. Las approached them and recognized Ahmad the Master Tailor. He looked like a sheep between the jaws of a wolf. “Set my shop on fire but please let me go, sir,” he begged.

Officer Rashi loudly laughed and said, “I’ll do that too some other day, Master. Come with me now.”

He didn’t let him down before they were in the middle of the square. Passers-by crowded around them. Las didn’t know any of them. He wanted to get back on his way. He took a few steps away. Suddenly, as if he was ordered to do so, he stopped and turned

around. He couldn't see anything but heard Master Tailor cry and beg for mercy. Las walked to the sidewalk and found a spot to stand on the step in front of a shop. Master Tailor had his arms around Officer Rashi begging him, "Officer Rashi, please forgive me. Let's go back into the shop please. You be the older brother and forgive me. I'll do whatever you wish."

Las choked up and swallowed. Officer Rashi ran his eyes on the crowd and asked, "Somebody get a pair of scissors for me."

Nobody budged. The officer walked around the circle the crowd had made. They all stepped back.

"I said some asshole get a pair of scissors for me," he yelled louder.

Las didn't notice who fetched him the scissors. Master Ahmad had gathered himself into a ball. He held the hanging crotch of his loose Kurdish pants tightly with both hands and begged, "For God's sake, don't do this. You aren't an infidel."

Officer Rashi clipped the blades of the scissors over his head, "Take your hands off it Master or I'll cut off your crotch and your..."

Las heard someone laugh. For a second he thought he would let the book drop and throw stones at the crowd. He heard someone hurling abuse. Some people took off in rage and hatred. Las jumped down the step. "And here is Master's crotch. Let's see how big your thing is."

Nobody laughed. Angered, the officer elbowed his way through the crowd and hung the crotch patch on a twig above the Master's tailor shop.

In spite of himself, Las could not move his feet. He felt he was made to look at the black flag over Master Ahmad's shop. He saw the crowd gathering around it and the flag fluttered above their heads. The crowd felt embarrassed before it. As if they sank into the earth out of shame, and little by little their large heads and distorted faces remained on the surface. They were round heads perfect to kick that Las saw rolling down the street perhaps each towards their own homes.

This nightmarish image frightened Las. He concentrated all his stamina in his feet and ran. He didn't look back before he reached home. Uncle Nayer sat in his usual spot in the courtyard. Frightened and sad, Las went to him. He wanted to throw himself in his arms just like he used to do as a child. Uncle Nayer didn't open his arms for him probably because Las's body was too big for his arms, or maybe he didn't have the strength he used to have.

Years later it was Las who first noticed that Uncle Nayer wasn't as energetic as before. In those days he spent most of his days and nights with Uncle Nayer, went to the field with him in the morning, walked home with him shoulder by shoulder in the evening. Although he was busy all day he always tried to have an eye on Uncle. Uncle Nayer wasn't as enthusiastic about the work as before. He didn't look at the field with excitement. He didn't come and go over the fallows and the fields; didn't smile at the flutter of the wheat in the field; did didn't go around the harvest spots. While harvesting

with bulls, he didn't sing to them, and didn't recite poetry when sacking the crop. Las knew he became tired quickly so he asked him to rest in the shade. Uncle didn't hesitate to welcome his suggestion; he sat and dozed off and didn't wake up until around evening. Even on the way home riding the donkey, he would be sad-looking and quiet. He stared at the road and didn't raise his head before reaching home. At night too, like all homebound elderly, he would sit quiet in a corner. Las wished he could come and go around him like he used to do as child and ask him to tell him folk tales but he felt embarrassed now that he was grown up. He encouraged Farkha to do so but Farkha wasn't fond of sitting by Uncle. Las was concerned and asked himself what could have come over him. The only thing he could think of was that he was sick.

"Uncle is not feeling well," he told his father one night.

His father wasn't surprised when he heard that. He fell silent for a moment and then said, "Son, Uncle Nayer is old now."

Las didn't understand if that was a question or a statement. Uncle had been old before too as far as he could remember even before that in the memory of his father and mother. But he had never seen him so weak.

"Uncle is weak, Father," he said.

"Why shouldn't he be weak, son?" he said, this time without pausing to think.

Las found a sort of carelessness and insensitivity in his father's words. He was surprised by it but didn't continue and kept quiet. The next day he asked his mother. She gave the same answer, "Uncle is old now."

Las didn't understand it. He thought that his father and mother went to bed every night with a new concern that none had anything to do with Uncle Nayer. They should be more sensitive and understanding about his frailty. He couldn't stop himself anymore and one night he told them angrily, "You don't care about Uncle at all."

Then afraid of hurting their feelings, he walked out of the house. Uncle was sitting under the mulberry tree under a shower of moonshine with his head hanging to one side. Apparently he had dozed off again. Las didn't approach him; he was still mad at his father and mother. Las still believed that they didn't give Uncle Nayer due respect and ignored him. "I respect him as much as seven fathers. I pour water on his hands and spread the prayer rug for him," his mother's words still rang in his ears.

Las was lost. Was his mother sarcastic about her offers of help to Uncle? Did she mention them to embarrass him? By the end of the summer of that year Wisu Agha was retired from working at the finance office. On the evening of that day he returned home happily with a box of fine dates in his hand. Uncle Nayer and Las had just returned from the field and were sitting on roof of the stable annex drinking their tea before dinner. Wisu Agha put the box of dates down and told Uncle, "Let's celebrate my freedom. Please help yourself."

Uncle picked up one with a smile and said, “May you be free in the presence of God, Wisu Agha.”

Wisu Agha offered the box to Las and said, “You too will soon be freed from farming in the fields, Las.”

Las picked up a date quickly and took the box from his father. He knew what his father meant. Wisu Agha had earlier promised to open a fabric shop for Las but Las had not told his father, he was not really fond of the idea. “Working in open fields is not imprisonment to me; I actually like it.”

Wisu Agha ignored Las, turned to Uncle Nayer, and said, “I’ll go with you to the farm from tomorrow.”

Uncle let out a deep sigh as if he was ready to rest for good and said, “You are doing the right thing, come and take back what belongs to you.”

The tone of his voice concerned Wisu Agha. He put his hand on his shoulder and said with a smile, “It all belongs to God. Both of us will leave it.”

“I will leave it earlier,” Uncle said with the same smile.

A week after that night Uncle would be bed-ridden. At his own request, a bedroll was spread under the mulberry tree for him to rest on it from noon late at night. His face didn’t look like the face of ill persons. He didn’t moan. Wisu Agha brought a doctor to see him. Uncle Nayer didn’t want the doctor to examine him.

“What do you want from me?” he asked.

Not taking it personally, the doctor said, “I want you to get back on your feet; it’s not time to say goodbye.”

“It’s time, doctor. Look here,” Uncle said.

Then he pointed to a flock of migrating birds flying in the sky over the courtyard. The doctor and the rest who were there in the courtyard for a few moments watched the migrating birds in silence. After they flew out of sight, they looked down. Although Uncle’s smile had not disappeared but two tear drops had rolled down his wrinkled face into his grey beard. After that day people poured to the house to visit him.

Uncle Nayer’s illness didn’t last long. One evening he asked Las, “Would you help me sit up, son?”

Las grabbed his arm and helped him sit up. Uncle leaned against the mulberry tree, and asked Las in a low voice that Las could barely hear, “Will you ask for some water for me?”

Khanzad who had come to give his aunt a hand heard him from over the roof of the stable annex and brought him some water quickly. Uncle took the bowl from her and held it to his mouth and drank some water. He put the bowl down, looked into Khanzad’s eyes, and said, “May good fortune smile upon you, my daughter.”

His gaze was heavy and penetrating. Khanzad could not bear that and dropped her head on her chest. Uncle's eyes didn't move. Las looked on at both in bewilderment. A heavy silence reigned. Only the eyes spoke; Uncle's eyes fixed on Khanzad's face; Khanzad's eyes looking down at her chest; and Las's gaze adrift. Nobody noticed Mother Guleh approach them. She suddenly screamed.

Uncle Nayer's death brought grief into the household. "This is the second time I am losing my father," Wisu Agha said. "I wish I had never known him," Mother Guleh said while sobbing.

Las fell ill. The doctor said that he had the flu and that he would be back on his feet again in eight or nine days, but Las didn't get back on his feet. Wisu Agha and Mother Guleh lost faith in the doctor's treatments and turned to the shrines of saints. They took vows and gave alms in the hope that their son would recover. But Las was bed-ridden until two months into the fall. It snowed more heavily that year. Las got up with the first snowfall. Khanzad was also in their house that day. She stared down on her breasts sad and silent just like the day when Uncle Nayer died. Mother Guleh knitted socks and stole a glance at Khanzad every now and then. When Las got up, Mother Guleh and Khanzad stared at him. Their eyes sparkled with elation. They were about to open their mouths when they both immediately sent a message to each other not to talk. Las went to the window and looked out at the mulberry tree. There was not a single leaf on it and snowflakes quietly sat on its twigs. Las wiped away his tears and walked to the door. Khanzad couldn't hold herself anymore and went after him. Mother Guleh crept towards

the window. Las leaned against the mulberry tree as though wanting to put his trust in it. He still grieved inside but hid it like a man. Khanzad stood before him. He watched the snowflakes falling on her shoulders as she grew up before his eyes. Time had leapt. One year, two years, three years... Khanzad, who was a quiet, nonchalant skinny girl now had a beautiful shapely body. She was tall and fleshy. Her raised breasts were a couple of doves that fluttered their wings under her clothes. A slow wave of smile swept across Las's face. "You have grown up, Khanzad," he said to himself. Then he thought he must have grown up too. He wanted to see himself in a mirror but looking into Khanzad's face was more enjoyable. He wanted to talk to her. "What's her voice like?" He was surprised at himself. They had grown together and now he wondered what her voice was like. Although the silence was pleasurable, it scared him. He was afraid that Khanzad would be frightened and would go inside. He wished he knew what was on her mind at that moment. "One fall has passed since Uncle Nayer's death," he said involuntarily.

Khanzad raised her head and their eyes began to speak. "I wish neither of us would move until it was dark," Las thought he said that under his breath. Khanzad heard that and a breeze of smile blew across her face. "Don't you wish the same?" The question chased the silence away. Las regretted speaking those words. Khanzad collected herself and said, "Thank God, it seems like you've become better." Las didn't say anything in an effort to bring back the silence.

"You'll catch a cold. Let's go inside," Khanzad said.

Las wasn't cold. His mind was busy wondering why Khanzad had come out after him. He turned towards the window of the room. Mother Guleh was watching. Khanzad noticed it and repeated, "You'll catch a cold. Let's go inside."

Las was afraid that that might be just a normal concern about his health. "As long as you are standing by me, I won't feel cold," suddenly came out of his mouth.

That completely peeled off the skin of Las's feelings. Khanzad looked up again. Their eyes locked. Their hearts started to beat fast. Khanzad couldn't stand there anymore and turned her eyes away and ran like a person who brings good news. When she climbed the stairs, Las thought she showed off her body intentionally. On the roof of the stable annex, she turned to him before walking into the house. That image was hung like a painting in Las's mind for years to come. After Khanzad disappeared into the house, Las collected himself, "What did I say? I hope I didn't hurt her." He regretted his words. Regret entirely wiped away his feeling of joy.

Khat Helaw came to their house that night. Khanzad had given her the good news of Las's recovery. "Why didn't she come herself?" Las was worried about her. His father and mother should have asked that, but they were too happy for Las to notice Khanzad missing. So he had to ask about her himself. But he did not dare to. It had always seemed to be the easiest question to ask but now it was very hard to him. He thought what if Khanzad had told everyone about the words they exchanged that evening. But it seemed a bit far-fetched to think that she would do such a thing. What if he had hurt her feelings? But he had not said anything bad to hurt her feelings. Las was anxious. Now that no one

asked about her, he had to ask the question. At that moment his aunt turned to him and said, "I would have come earlier. Khanzad didn't tell me until after sundown that you had gotten up." Why hadn't she told her? Khanzad had gone home before sundown. He couldn't hold it back longer and asked, "Why didn't she come?"

Wisu Agha and Mother Guleh who just noticed her missing asked, "Right, where is Khanzad?"

"She went to bed early without even eating. I think she's coming down with a cold," Khat Helaw said with a smile.

Las was relieved. "So she didn't tell them anything." He remembered it was snowing earlier. "I hope she hasn't really caught a cold." Las liked somehow to come up with an excuse to sneak into their house.

They were neighbors who shared a wall and the courtyard separated them. After Khanzad's father died, Wisu Agha had walled off part of their own courtyard for them. Las thought what he would tell Khanzad in a brief moment when he would sneak into their house. "Why didn't you come?" He asked her the next day. After he was dressed and wrapping a sash around his waist to get ready to go to their house, she came. She walked in quite normally. When she saw Las getting ready to go out, she asked, "Are you going out?"

She spoke normally as always. She sounded like she didn't remember the words they had spoken the day before. Las looked into her eyes closely. He found nothing

unusual in them. So all those thoughts he had had last night were for nothing? Feeling embarrassed, he asked, “Why didn’t you come last night?”

“I was sick,” she said smiling. “You gave me your sickness.”

Las tried to read her words differently. He went towards the window. Mother Guleh was in the courtyard. So they were alone. He turned to Kanzad and said, “I thought you were upset with me.”

Kanzad ignored that. She picked up a broom and said, “Aunt needs help. Why don’t you leave so I can sweep the room?”

Las stood in front of her and said, “I asked if you were upset because of what I told you yesterday?”

“Why, what did you say that I’d be upset?” Kanzad stopped and asked.

Hadn’t she really realized? Las just then realized he was dealing with a girl.

“I want you to be always by my side,” he said.

Nothing could be clearer than that. Kanzad was shy. Blood rushed to her tender cheeks. Las remembered that he had seen that rush of blood the other day too. So she had gotten it. Las waited for an answer. Kanzad knew that she couldn’t get away without giving an answer.

“Las, I’ll be by your side, always,” she looked down and said.

They both fell silent for a moment. They didn't know what to say. The joy of the moment had overwhelmed them. When they collected themselves, they felt shy to look into each other's eyes. Khanzad picked up the broom and Las rushed out.

The snow in the backstreets and courtyards had just melted when they dressed Khanzad in the wedding gown. A golden cotton dress, a velvet vest, and an Ali Khani sash. A *tasklaw* hat, flowers and *damaklaw*. A gold necklace, *parchak*, tassels, and a silk belt.

Wisu Agha wrapped the sash around her waist. He was the father and the father-in-law. He took her hand and walked her from his other house to his house; from this door to the other. No more than five women were in the bride's company, no drums and oboes, no dancing and celebration. Las waited for her on the roof of the stable annex. He was surrounded by a handful of friends. The bride reached the mulberry tree in the courtyard. The groom was supposed to toss an apple at her as a sign of welcome. Calmly, he tossed a red apple in her direction. His brother Farkha caught it in the air.

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Vita

Ahmad Aminpour was born in Sardasht, West Azarbaijan, Iran on September 11, 1983, the son of Zinat Moludi and Jalal Aminpour. He graduated from Ebn-e Sina High School in Rabat-Sardasht, in 2001 and subsequently entered The University of Tehran in Tehran. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Highest Distinction in English Language and Literature in 2005. In 2007, he received a Fullbright scholarship to teach Persian at The University of Texas at Austin. In the spring of 2009, he entered the Persian Studies graduate program at the University of Texas at Austin.

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