

fter 3 years living together in our tiny quarters at the end of the huge mansion, Shazdeh made a new condition. Mom could only keep two girls. Someone had to go. I don't know why.

It could have been the political situation that limited funds, or perhaps we were just getting older and attracting more attention from the local boys and men. Aki, at 12, attracted attention with her beautiful body and mature, outgoing personality. Ashi was more beautiful than Aki, and very sexy. She was only 9, but she was also a handful and caused many troubles.

I overheard the discussions between my mother and Shazdeh. They were very open with their conversation about abandoning one child while I pretended to play. I don't think they knew that, even though young, I understood what they were talking about.

Shazdeh said, "I don't want to lose you. Go find their father. Maybe he can take care of one of the girls."

The idea shocked my mind: "God, I don't want to be the one left out." And I cried at the thought of being separated. I thought, "If she takes care of me, I will take care of her for the rest of her

life." Now I realize how selfish I was, but I did keep that promise.

So Mom started to search for my father. She asked friends from the past and discovered that he had returned from Moscow, perhaps with amnesty from the military, changed his name and opened a small fresh fruit market in Hasan-Abad Square. Hasan-Abad Square, constructed in the early 1300s, had been restored by the Qajar dynasty and featured four identical buildings like an Italian castle. It was a bustling, modern area with paved stone streets, criss-crossed with walkways and lined with metal speed bumps to slow traffic.

Without a job Mom would lose all of her children. She had to make a terrible choice to leave one with the man who ruined her life. She hated to go to my father but without any other help she had no choice. She didn't trust him, and yet he could be their daughter's only savior. There was no time to lose, or she would lose her fragile job situation. She was in a rush, and I grabbed her chador, running after her.

We stopped in front of his small store, with fruits and vegetables on the street in boxes. At the doorstep, Rasoul came out and leaned against the wall. This was the first time I had seen my father, because when he left Ardebil I was an infant. I was shocked to see my sister Aki's face on a stranger, with blonde curly hair just like hers, but also with blue-green eyes and light skin that made him look foreign. It was like he was not even from Iran. I stared at him, collecting the details of his face—his appearance was so similar to my sister who I loved so deeply and yet he was despised by my mom. How could Mom hate this sweet face?

He did not pay any attention to me, not with a look, a hug or a word after four years. In later years, I realized that this was the

moment when I formed the notion that there was no emotional bond between a father and his child. Little by little, I realized what I missed as I saw other children with their loving fathers, and I had a lingering sense of rejection.

My mother asked Rasoul, "Do you remember how I saved your life by hiding you and letting you escape? You left me with four children and took everything. When you came out of hiding I had no sign that you were looking for your children, and you would meet your responsibilities. You stole away my fortune, and I have the letter to prove it."

She was crying and wiping her face with her chador. I was recording all of this in my brain and I can never forget it.

He was leaning against the wall, smoking, and looking as far away as Russia.

"How did you find me?"

"Through my friend, Tahereh."

"So what do you want from me?"

"Why didn't you let us know when you came out of hiding?"

"Who needs me?"

"Didn't you remember you have a wife and three children? Do you know anything about Parviz? Do you remember him? And do you know that our only son, Parviz, is dead? He asked and asked for you as he was dying. But you weren't there to help the poor child! Didn't you care for him at all?"

Mom was crying very hard, so I watched Dad to see his reaction. He was as cold as ice, frozen.

She angrily screamed, "Do you have any God? Do you know God?"

He pointed inside the store, went in and we followed.

“Lower your voice. I never got anything I wanted; what more do you want from me? You always took care of everything yourself, and you were your daddy’s princess, so busy with your God. You are a *mariam-moghadas* (holy Mariam). The blessed mother didn’t have a husband, so you are the same as her. These children are Haj-Ali’s children, not mine. I hated your father. I hated your father’s name and his fame and fortune. He influenced everything. Haj-Ali thought he was the God of Ardebil and raised you the same way. I am so happy I am Godless now—I have no God in my life. It’s your job to take care of the children, to take care of everybody.”

“My father was well respected and always took care of his children, and helped our village.”

“With a father like that, who needs me?”

If someone makes fun of your mother you never forget it, and I transitioned from confused and helpless to scared and angry, wanting to help Mom with no idea how.

Rasoul didn’t show any emotion at all, and said, “You don’t need my support because God and your father’s heritage are always with you.”

This was a pattern with him, to live in the present with no acknowledgment of his past. His life was such a mess that he couldn’t afford to look back into a previous chapter, but simply turned the page. I was confused about how he could be so cold and heartless and still be my father. And I felt helpless to help my mom.

Mom said, “I’m a young woman with three beautiful daughters to care for and no resources. People are trying to take advantage of me. I would never have chosen to see you, but now have to ask you to become the father you need to be. I brought our three children from Ardebil to Tehran and have moved them searching

for a corner to be secure. All my resources are gone and I am working day and night to manage with no man in our life.”

He said nothing. He may still have been hiding because of his past relationship with the Tudeh party. There were many like him in prison, and he was very cautious to not be visible or connected to the people in his past.

She continued, “I found a secure place to live with three kids, and have provided a good education for them. Now the master of the house has asked me, because it is so crowded, to give one girl away. He wants Aki to get married, give Ashi away and have only one child with me. Aki is not ready to marry; she is like you with a very bright mind. I would give blood to have her continue her education. Poor Ashi is only 9 years old; she is the most worried and difficult child in our family. She needs a stable home, a mother’s and father’s love.”

She now looked at me and hugged me, suddenly aware that I was witnessing this conversation. “And look at Mahi, only 7 years old.” She put her head on my shoulder and cried very hard.

“Help me not be separated from my children.”

I imagined him saying he was sorry for the past, that he was here now and would take care of us, and Mom wouldn’t have to worry any more.

Instead he said, “I, myself, am not in a stable situation. I have a very messy life. I cannot take all of you, but will take one if I have to, if that solves the problem.” He said it like he was buying fruit.

Mom was surprised by this, and she embraced this idea; at least he would help her with this impossible situation. She announced the horrible decision that she had already thought through a thousand times.

“I need to keep Aki, because she found the job I now have, and will be expected to stay with me. She was our savior and I need to keep this connection. I must keep Mahi because she is still so young. So I have no choice but to send Ashi to live with you. You have to do for Ashi, what my father did for you.”

“Don’t mention your fucking father to me any more! Just bring Ashi to me, and go away from my sight!”

He opened the door and pointed the way out.

I thought, “Who is this cruel dog? I hate him.”

On the way home, Mom was like a crazy woman, crying and running along the walkway that went from one side of the square to the other. She was shaking; it was hard for her to keep the chador in her hand. With one hand she grabbed me and pulled me along very quickly, and with the other grabbed the chador. Meanwhile she was wiping her nose. I was holding onto her chador not to lose her as she rushed.

She was talking loudly to God, “Do you see what is going on? Where are all the promises my father gave me? Why does all of this happen to me? Where are you? I helped him to escape, gave him money, gave him an address to be safe, and in this special moment when I need him, he rejects me, even though I am still his wife! All men are dogs! I should never have gotten married. I should never have had children. They are so self occupied. Even my father remarried after my mother died. All men are selfish and they want everything for themselves.” She wrapped herself deeper and deeper into her chador.

Everyone was looking at us and I was embarrassed. I tied the chador in a knot around my hand and was running after her, scared and confused. Suddenly, I fell down. Sharp, killing pain shot

through my arm. My right elbow struck against one of the metal bumps in the road and broke. It was so painful, my mom and I were now both crying like crazy. She took my hand and cared for me, calming me down.

We got on the bus and finally got home. There she put egg yolk on a bandage and placed it on my broken bone, opened the holy book over it and gave me holy water to drink. She put me to sleep.

When I woke up it was a sunny afternoon and Mom was packing. I had been asleep for maybe 18 hours. She said the Qur'an and holy water healed me and made me sleep. When I woke up it was very difficult for me to move my arm. The stuff she had put on the injured area was like a splint, and my arm slowly began healing with the bones out of place. My arm is still out of place at the elbow joint, as Ashi's life is still out of place. We were never totally the same again.

Mom went to Shazdeh and told him that she had disposed of one of her daughters. Then we had a very sad private party and she explained the situation to my sisters.

"Girls, sit down here. I need to tell you what is going to happen."

She then explained her decision.

She said, "Aki is our connection to the Shazdeh's family, Mahi is so young, and Ashi has to go with her daddy."

When she heard the news, Ashi started to cry, "Why me? Why me?"

Aki said, "No, Mom, no, Mommy, there must be another way."

Mom tried to be calm, and said that she loved her. "I will

come and see you every weekend, and you can come here during the summer when the Qajars are in Paris.”

Everyone was crying. Ashi became more agitated, started pulling her hair and hitting herself, then went to the corner of the room, covered herself in a blanket, crying softly. Aki took a book and started reading in another corner of the room. Mom started cooking rice, quietly sniffing and trying to hide her sadness. I felt like fainting and went into the garden.

For the next 10 days, it was like there had been a death in the family. It felt like we might die without Ashi or she might die without us. Everyone kept to themselves. Because of my arm, I was mostly in bed and sick. Aki remained occupied with her own books, as she always did, to isolate herself and avoid the real world. Ashi remained secluded and quiet. Mommy started packing Ashi's things and making sure she would have what she needed. We all wanted to give everything we owned to her, so we begged Mom to pack our dresses and shoes for Ashi too. We were not sure we would ever see her again, just as if she were going to the battlefield. Mom was sleepless. Even when she was not working, we could hear her praying and talking to God a lot.

The emotional trauma of forced separation was far more than the physical hurt of a broken bone.