

The
Lion
Women
of **Tehran**

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Dedicated to the brave women of Iran

When my life was no longer anything,
Nothing but the tick-tock of a wall clock,
I discovered that I must,
That I absolutely had to
Love madly.

Forugh Farrokhzad, *The Window*

Ocean waves begin their journey thousands of miles out at sea. Their form, size, and shape come from the speed of prevailing winds in the atmosphere, the power of currents hidden beneath the sea, and their “long fetch”—the distance between a wave’s point of origin and its point of arrival . . . Events that seem to appear in the present from out of nowhere in actuality have a long history behind them.

George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*

ONE

December 1981

I stood on the lacquered floor—a small woman in black with a rectangular name badge on my chest. My coiffed, contented look was calculated so I'd appear not just satisfied but quietly superior. In America, I'd learned the secret to being a successful salesperson was to act like one of the elite, as if spritzing perfume on customers' blue-veined wrists were doing them a favor.

A sea of haughty New Yorkers swerved to avoid my spray. Thank God for the more down-to-earth women—the cooks and bakers coming up to the first floor from the basement home goods section—they were too polite to reject the fragrant droplets I offered. Orange, lily, jasmine, and rose notes nestled in the lines of my palms and the fibers of my clothes.

“Look at you, Ellie! Soon you'll take over this whole brand. I better watch my back!” My friend and coworker Angela, returning from her cigarette break, sidled up and whispered in my ear. The scent of her Hubba Bubba gum couldn't hide the smoke on her breath.

I shivered at the reek of tobacco. The bitter, sour notes would forever remind me of one long-ago night in Iran. The night when an act of betrayal changed the entire course of my friendship with Homa and both of our lives.

From the moment I'd read Homa's letter last night, I'd been a wreck.

I batted away Angela's compliments, said I wasn't doing all that well, really, and that I had a headache because I hadn't eaten all day.

“I just might faint,” I added with a touch of melodrama.

It was a relief when Angela was whisked away by a needy customer.

My mother always said the envy of others invites the evil eye to cast doom on us. She'd often told me that being perceived as too competent, happy, or successful could summon misfortune. I knew belief in the powers of other people's jealousy and the jinxing of an evil eye needed to be cast off. But at the age of thirty-eight, in the middle of that massive Manhattan department store, I was still unwittingly beholden to superstition.

The truth of who I was could not be escaped. Nor could the flaw I had spent years trying to quash and erase.

The guilty one had always been me.

Earlier that morning, in our apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, my husband, Mehrdad, had tried to comfort me with breakfast. He prepared toast with feta cheese and cherry jam. He brewed bergamot tea. But I couldn't eat or drink. The jam was made from Homa's recipe. The bergamot tea in the white teapot adorned with two pink roses reminded me of her. With the arrival of her letter, her absence dominated my life all over again.

When I had first seen the red-and-blue-bordered airmail envelope, I'd assumed it was from Mother and would contain the usual mix of laments and updates about the dangerous political situation in Iran. I knew those letters were probably opened and read by regime forces, but my mother often didn't care and wrote bluntly: *Aren't you lucky, Ellie? You left and escaped the violent demonstrations and deafening riots. You skipped our country's slide back into medieval times. Women have lost decades, no, centuries, of rights in this country. I'm glad you're sitting comfortably with your professor husband in America. Thank goodness you got out!*

But when I pulled the onionskin paper from the envelope and unfolded it, my heart almost stopped. For there on the page was the unmistakable curlicue handwriting of my old friend, Homa.

As girls, we'd sat on the same elementary school bench in downtown Tehran. Together we scratched out hopscotch grids in our neighborhood

alley and raced to school with satchels bouncing against our hips. With Homa, I had zigzagged through the mazes of the Grand Bazaar and shared ice cream sandwiches and dreams for the kind of women we'd become. In her stone kitchen, I learned to cook. With her hand in mine, I jumped over the largest bonfires. When we'd hiked up Alborz Mountain and seen Tehran laid out beneath us, it felt like the world could be entirely ours.

Until one moment of striking carelessness ruined it all.

For the past seventeen years, we had been *ghaar*—purposefully estranged—with no contact save one unplanned encounter. Now her letter was in my hands. How did she know where to find me? She must have gotten my address from Mother.

One page of Homa's letter was filled with questions about my life in America. And another was about her situation in Iran. Her health was good (*pressure in the sinuses but nothing more*), the weather (*cold and yet delicious in the mountains—remember the teahouse we went to?*) was fitting for the season, her job as a teacher kept her busy. But her mind was not at ease (*You wouldn't recognize this country, Ellie. I don't know where we went wrong*). At the bottom was a sentence about Bahar, her daughter, and how she loved to sing. She closed the letter with *Can you call me, Ellie? Please. My number is 272963. I need to speak to you. It's urgent.*

After I told Mehrdad about the letter, he held me close and said gently, "It's good she's reached out. You were the best of friends. Time to air it all out, Ellie. Speak to her."

How I wish it were so simple.

I couldn't blame Homa for cutting contact. But now she had flown back into my life all innocence and zest, creating a crater of questions with her sign-off. *It's urgent.*

At the end of my shift, I removed my name pin, put it in the counter drawer, then pulled on my warm camel coat and striped leg warmers.

As I rushed outside toward the subway station, the cold December air

carried the scent of roasted nuts from food carts and diesel fumes from hissing city buses. Large-bellied, tired-looking men dressed as Santa Claus rang bells, pointing to their kettle buckets and shouting, “Merry Christmas!” Gold and silver tinsel framed the insides of shop windows and trees with shiny ornaments winked behind glass displays. There was a chill in the air that made my breath float in visible rings.

The words in Homa’s letter ran through my head. Suddenly a taxi swerved far too close to me and honked loudly. My heart fell as I remembered another time a car had almost hit me. But this time, the only damage done was sludgy puddle water soaking through my leg warmers.

A neon pizza sign flashed red and yellow close to the subway entrance. I got giddy at the thought of a slice.

Since arriving in New York almost four and a half years ago, I’d strolled through Central Park, visited museums filled with global art, and dined in a few fancy restaurants. But no cultural experience topped eating a salty, cheesy, hot slice of New York pizza. Every pizzeria seemed to be in on the secret recipe for tangy tomato sauce and a perfectly foldable crust.

I looked at my wristwatch. No point in getting into the train hungry and drained of energy. I slipped into the pizza place and waited in line to order. After paying my seventy-five cents, I walked out with a cheese slice snug in a triangular cardboard box. I opened the box to take my first bite.

I heard her before I saw her. She moaned rhythmically as though in pain. Under the dim light of the streetlamp near the subway station, I made her out: an old woman huddled against the lamppost, two plastic bags on her feet, a flowered headscarf barely covering her hair. In between moans she asked unresponsive passersby in a weak voice on mechanical repeat: “Madam, can you spare a dime? Mister, can you spare a nickel?”

I wanted to get to my train. Get home. I needed to think, to decide whether I would call my old friend. But how could I ignore this woman? I went to her and stooped down. She smiled, and I was surprised to see straight and perfect teeth. The old woman held my gaze. Her eyes were watery and

opaque-looking. She shrugged slightly. In that small movement, I detected a silent acknowledgment of the randomness of the wheel of fortune.

I handed her my triangular cardboard box—the pizza in it still hot and untouched. From my bag, I found the kiss-lock purse Mother had given me as a child in Iran, opened it, and took out all the coins and a few scrunched-up bills. American money still appeared strange to me: so green and thick compared to our bills back home. The lady took the pizza, coins, and bills I offered with a look of bewilderment.

I got up and walked away. As I descended the subway station steps, I turned around only once.

She was eating the pizza quickly—her face an expression of complete relief.

When the train rushed into the tunnel and screeched to a stop, we all jostled and hustled to get inside. The crowded subway car smelled of urine and damp wool. Thankfully, I got a seat. Wedged between strangers, I was grateful for the anonymity. Not one person in that dirty, busy, fascinating, energetic, depressing, alluring city knew about my past or the guilt and regret that swallowed me whole.

The train lurched and blasted forward. Someone by the door sneezed and a gentleman in a baseball cap hummed a tune that was strangely cheerful.

I closed my eyes. I remembered all of it—every single bit. Those days of connection and chaos that had shaped our friendship could never be forgotten.