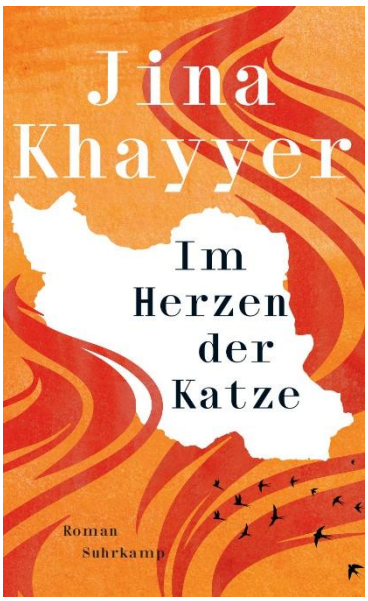


**Jina Khayyer**

**In the Heart of the Cat**

A Novel

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Sample translation by Joel Scott

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“Bisharaf! Bisharaf! Bisharaf! “Unconscionable! Unconscionable! Unconscionable!” They scream into the night in my hand. They are many. Children holding their mothers’ hands, girls with long, loose hair, waving their headscarves like flags in the air, women arm in arm, boys, men, old, young, shoulder to shoulder. They march along Valiasr Street beneath the plane trees, between honking cars and rattling motorbikes, illuminated by the golden glow of the streetlamps. They are unarmed. With every step, their voices weave together more tightly into a braid. “Bisharaf! Bisharaf! Bisharaf! Unconscionable! Unconscionable! Unconscionable!”

Suddenly, a voice breaks out of the chorus. A woman calls out, “I’m armed with nothing but my body. It is my destiny to fight for the future with my body. A future in freedom.”

A stream of Persian washes over me. My heart turns to water, my tears overwhelm me. I wasn’t prepared to hear Persian on Instagram, from the mouths of strangers, people who sound familiar only because of their language.

Again, the chorus rises in my hand, like a wave, I hold onto my phone tightly, as if the wave could carry it away. Thousands of mouths repeat only this one word, “Bisharaf! Bisharaf! Bisharaf! Unconscionable! Unconscionable! Unconscionable!!”

A second voice emerges from the chorus, a woman sings. “Jin Jiyan Āzādi,” the chorus joins in, “Jin Jiyan Āzādi,” I don’t understand the first two words, I only know Āzādi, freedom. Now the chorus sings, “Zan Zendegi Āzādi, Woman Life Freedom.”

My Instagram feed refreshes. I see the lifeless body of a young woman. The colours of an intensive care unit, pale blue, turquoise-green, ice-grey. Blood stuck to her ear. Instagram hides nothing. Regardless of how many filters are placed on the pictures, anybody who wants can see the brutal reality. I read: *Jina Mahsa Amini was beaten into a coma by the batons of the morality police in Tehran. Now she is dead!* I read her name again, *Jina*, Jina with a J. I have never heard of anyone with the same name as me.

The coldness of her body emanates through the phone in my hand, entering into my bones. I sit at my desk in my study, frozen still, looking at the dead woman in my hand, reading her name over and over, Jina with a J. The dead body bears my name. I always thought my name was made up. I thought my mother had invented my name. I thought that because my mother had been convinced until the last moment that I would be a boy, she hadn’t picked out a girl’s name, and then when a girl had come out of her, she quickly gave me her own name, changing just one letter, N for L, Jina instead of Jila.

I look at the girl who bore my name and ask myself why, in forty-six years, I have never heard of someone with the same name as me.

My Instagram feed refreshes. I read, *Jina Mahsa Amini, a Kurdish woman, was visiting Tehran with her family when the morality police picked her up on the streets and dragged her away from her brother*. Her brother pleaded with the guards, begging them to let his sister go, explaining that they were from out of town, just visiting, that she had been wearing her headscarf, she didn't know that in Tehran there were strict rules in force, none of her hair had been showing, he said. The morality police showed no mercy, dragged Jina into a van and drove off with her.

I read, *Jina is a Kurdish name and means "The one who gives life"*.

I read, *The one who gives life is dead*.

I read, *The one who gives life would have turned twenty-three in five days*.

I long for my mother. I turn my phone off, open my laptop, and try to get in touch with her on Facetime. My mother answers immediately. She's already lying in bed, no light apart from the black-blue of the screen of her phone, which makes her look dramatic, the way she's lying there, her hair fanned out on the pillow like a crown.

"You look like Cleopatra, Māmān", I say.

"I am Cleopatra," my mother replies cheekily, pursing her pomegranate-red lips, which always look freshly made up thanks to the lipliner she had tattooed on years ago. She turns her head, showing her profile, strikes that aristocratic pose she does so well, and bats her eyelashes.

"Did I wake you?"

"No, my daughter." My mother sits up and pushes two pillows behind her back to prop herself up a bit until all I can see is her chin.

“I can only see your chin,” I say. “Where is your phone stand?”

“That better?” My mother twirls her phone around. “I can’t use the stand in bed. It only works when I’m sitting at the table.”

“Why don’t you have any lights on?” I ask.

“The moon is shining into the room. That’s light,” says my mother, and turns the phone around to face the window. “Can you see the moon?”

“No, Māmān, how am I supposed to see your moon, it’s not like it’s hanging in the window.”

“Show me your moon,” my mother says. I turn my laptop around, I stand up from behind the desk, open the window and hold the computer out into the evening and up to the moon.

“As māhi tā māh dusset doram«, says my mother, “I love you from the fish to the moon.”

“From the fish to the moon,” I repeat. I like this expression. Long before there were gods, when people still bowed down before nature, the Zoroastrians used to say from the fish to the moon and meant the entire universe, from the lowest point, the bottom of the ocean, to the highest point, the moon, and when they conveyed a request, they directed their wishes from the fish to the moon … “from the fish to the moon,” I whisper quietly to myself again, before asking my mother if she has seen the news.

“News depresses me,” says my mother, shaking her phone back and forth, as if she is trying to shake the news off it. When she finally stops, all I see is the ceiling.

“Māmān, all I can see is the ceiling,” I say, as I sit back down behind my desk, laptop in hand.

“Better?” My mother is now holding the phone so close to her face that I think her nose is about to poke through the screen and into my room. I say nothing, because otherwise she’ll give up and place her phone on the bedside table. I don’t know how to ask if she has heard about the girl they killed without immediately breaking into tears. Just thinking about it makes my lower lip quiver, the way it always quivers when I’m so upset that I can’t express myself. Helplessly, I look past the computer and up at the moon outside my window.

“Did you hear about the girl they killed?” I finally ask. My mother nods at me silently. I can feel my eyes filling with tears and I hang my eyes on the moon.

“Did you know…” my voice trails off, I try to draw a bit of strength from the moon to put in my voice, “did you know that my name is of Kurdish origin?”

“No,” says my mother quietly, “I didn’t know that.” I can hear her struggling to keep her voice under control. I can hear how she too is trying to hold back her tears.

“Are you crying?” I ask.

My mother takes a deep breath and shakes her phone around, making the camera cut her face in half.

“Māmān, I can only see half your face.”

“Okay now?”

“Now it’s okay,” I say, once my mother is holding her phone still in front of her face again, and I ask her why we have never heard of anyone with the same name as me.

“Because they forbid the Kurds from using their names,” says my mother so quietly that I can barely hear her.

“Did you know that Jina means *The one who gives life*?” I can no longer hold back my tears, so many feelings come at once, I am confused to speak about Jina but not mean myself, I’m angry that they chase us and beat us and kill us, without consequences, I surrender to my mother, sobbing in front of her in a way I haven’t done for a long time.

“Don’t cry, my daughter,” my mother says gently. There is a tenderness in her voice that my mother reveals only sparingly, but when she does, it soothes me immediately. “Give yourself nice thoughts. Think of the sea. Whenever something gets to me, I think of the sea, I dive underwater and swim, I swim until my heart laughs again. The health of the heart is the most important thing. You must not let anything or anybody crush your heart. You carry the sea in your heart. That’s why your heart turns to water. Hearts that bend like the sea can never break.”

My mother abruptly drops the phone onto the duvet, I’m back to looking at the ceiling. I hear my mother clicking a melody with her fingers.

“What are you doing?” I call out to my mother, half crying, half comforted.

“Dancing,” my mother calls back joyfully.

She makes me laugh. There are many things I love about my mother, but if I had to pick out just one thing, it would be that she never complains. And no matter how difficult things are, her answer is always a dance.

“Where are you dancing to?” I call out to her.

My mother holds the phone right in front of her nose again and whirls around the bedroom with me in her hand. “Into the kitchen,” says my mother, “come, let’s dance into the kitchen together.”

“What are we dancing?” I ask.

“Tango,” sings my mother, “beautiful tango, take me by the hand,” my mother swings, singing, with me in her hand, out of the bedroom and into the hallway, “beautiful tango, until you make me dance, come,” says my mother, “let’s light some espand,” but then she turns around again, tangoes back into her living room, “now I could use the telephone stand, where are you, ah, there you are,” my mother does a dramatic lunge, the telephone jolts in her hand, I close my eyes for a second so I don’t get dizzy from all the back and forth and up and down, until she puts the phone on the stand on the countertop, next to the stove. The camera is now pointing at a white candle.

“For Jina,” says my mother, and lights the wick of the candle. The flame immediately casts a shadow on my mother’s fingers. My mother takes her hands out of the shadow of the candle and disappears from the frame, I hear her looking for the little incense pot in the kitchen drawer where she keeps her pots.

“Here it is!” She holds the incense pot out to me and sprinkles two tablespoons of espand into it. “The stove is on,” she says, and places the incense pot on the glimmering stovetop.

I hear the espand beginning to crackle. Smoke rises up and clouds the picture. My mother wafts the smoke toward me with both hands, “bismi’llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahimi, the ghosts of the gracious and merciful ones will protect you,” she says, and purses her lips to kiss

the air. “And now go and call your big sister and ask her how she’s doing, she’ll be happy to hear from you.” Then the connection cuts out. My mother hung up without another word.

I can’t control myself, as if my movements were being directed by a remote, I pick up my phone and open Instagram. I see a video of a girl dancing on the street in the dark, her silhouette barely visible against the night. Only the glow of her telephone is lighting her up. Her hair is short, she’s wearing raver sunglasses, her nose piercing flashes with every movement like a tiny firework, she holds her index and middle finger up to the camera in a V shape. In the background, I can hazily make out the Borj-e Āzādi. I have never seen the Āzādi tower at night. A string of lights is tracing its silhouette. I turn the sound on and hear the girl singing in Persian, “We lose and get back up and go from darkness to darkness until we see the light. No matter how dark and terrifying the path before us might be, there’s always an end to the darkness, and the end of the darkness is light.” Tears run down my cheeks. I wonder how late it is now in Tehran. I can never remember how many hours ahead of my time Tehran is. Two and a half hours. Eleven o’clock now. Roya won’t be asleep yet. And if she is, she’ll probably have her phone off and not answer.

I’m just about to hang up when Roya appears on my computer screen, gasping for air. Her nose is glowing as if she’s just come in from the cold.

“Hi,” says Roya, breathless.

“Why are you out of breath?” I ask.

“We just walked in the door,” says Roya. She sounds excited. “We were on the streets, protesting, all of us together, Nika, Amir, Kobra, Elahè, Hassandra.”

“Who is Hassandra?” I interrupt Roya.

“Hassan, Nika’s best friend, Elahè’s son, now daughter, now Hassandra.” Roya grins.

“Wow, since when?” I ask.

“Officially since this summer, but it’s been no secret for quite some time now,” says Roya.

“How did Elahè take it?” I ask.

“I’ve got to say, from the very beginning she took it with confidence.”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, I just don’t know how confidently I would react if Nika wanted to be Niko.”

“It’s really brave for a boy to become a girl, especially in Iran,” I say. I immediately think of Iman. My heart twists into a knot, as if it were trying to wring itself out. I can see Roya’s lips tightening, for a brief moment her eyes darken, like the Earth does when a cloud suddenly moves in front of the sun.

“I wish you were here,” says Roya. “The death of that girl has awakened the spirit of resistance in all of us. Her death hit like a hammer on the switch of a time bomb. We had all kind of retreated underground, but now we have more energy than ever before.” Roya sounds combatant, more combatant than I have heard her since that winter in 2009.

“May their damned god show mercy on them, our tongues are long and strong and hit hard, I can hit so hard with my tongue that today I even scared myself,” says Roya. She laughs.

“This time we’ll get them,” Roya continues. “This time, we’ll get rid of those murderers, once and for all. You should be here. This time it’s all different. We’re all together, we’re standing side by side, the old, the young, boys and girls, women, men … do you remember Khāleh Iran, Amir’s aunt, she was so devout she used to sleep in her chador. Today, she threw it into the fire, she threw it into the fire today together with all of us, you should have been there, it was so beautiful, you should have seen the joy on Nika’s face when she threw her headscarf into the fire, we all burned our scarves and danced and sang *We are many, we are not afraid, we are not alone*. We made a fire in the middle of Valiasr Street, up in Tajrish, a fire in the middle of the street, like back in the day, before the murderers banned dancing and singing and fires, just like on Chaharshanbe Suri.” Roya looks dreamily through me, as if she were looking through a window, into a future that brings joy. She looks happy.

“The time is now,” says Roya. “Now, we all have to work together, do everything we can. This time we’re going to bring them down. This time, everything is different. This time, we’re all standing up for each other. I’ve never seen anything like it,” says Roya, “boys, girls, men, women, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Bahai, Kurds, Balochs, Lurs, we are all one body, calling out from the one mouth.”

Roya tells me that *Jin Jiyan Āzādi* is the call of the Kurdish women freedom fighters, who have had to defend their bodies millions of times, from the Syrians, the Turks, the Iraqis, from this damned Islamic regime, against all the tyrants who treat women’s bodies as if they are raw materials.

I Immediately see images from 2009 before my eyes. Does it not also make Roya think back to 2009? She can’t have forgotten it. I’ll never forget it as long as I live. For some cowardly reason I don’t dare ask Roya if she isn’t afraid that everything will repeat itself, so I just ask, “Isn’t it dangerous?”

“When you live in constant fear,” says Roya, “fear loses its power. It’s like breathing. You breathe, but you don’t think about the fact that you’re breathing. We must forget our fear now and take them on. We need to take them on once and for all, to finally liberate ourselves. And anyway, this time, we’re only going out to protest after dark. The night protects us.”

“And what about Nika?” I ask, worried.

“What about me, Aunty?” I hear Nika ask in the background.

“Aren’t you going to say hello to me?” I call out to Nika.

“I don’t have time right now, Aunty. I’m just getting some food, we’ll be out all night tonight,” calls Nika, but then, to my joy, shows her face for a second so that I can quickly blow her a kiss. She asks if I have heard about what’s going on over there at all. I say that my Instagram feed is full of posts from Tehran, that every second, through Instagram, I hear about… I stutter, in the little Facetime window I see my lips trying but failing to form my name. All my life, I have only ever said this name out loud when speaking about myself.

“How did they manage to get pictures of her in the emergency room?” I ask Roya. “I mean, they’ve even got surveillance cameras in the toilets. A nurse? A doctor? Who took that photo? Whoever took it will immediately be arrested,” I say.

“Finally, the world is seeing that we are being held prisoner by a pack of godless murderers,” says Roya, upset.

“Isn’t it crazy that she had the same name as me? I thought Māmān had made up my name.”

“It’s so crazy, Aunt Jina,” says Nika, snatching the phone from Roya’s hand and looking at me piercingly, “your name is the name of the revolution, we call your name in the streets.”

I’m in tears again. I feel cowardly and weak in front of my sister and niece. Brave and unafraid of death, they are taking to the streets in Tehran and I am sitting here, frightened, tearful and completely confused in France, at home, in safety. I know what these murderers are capable of. I have seen it myself. They tolerate no resistance. They’ll arrest them. They’ll torture them. They’ll… Maybe Roya is right, I try to calm myself, maybe this time it’ll be different.

Nika gives the phone back to Roya and disappears from the screen to pack a picnic for the night.

“Don’t you at least want to send Nika to Wiesbaden, to Māmān? Or to me?” I ask Roya cautiously.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I hear Nika calling in the background.

“This is the day,” says Roya, confident of victory, “the day when the calls of all Iranians will become a dagger in their throat. The day when all the flowers will bloom. I see the kids, Nika, Kobra, Hassandra, taking to the streets. They shout, *Give us our freedom or kill us!* Compared to them, Amir and I are cowards. We lived a double life, behind closed doors, underground, for us, everything existed only underground, underground concerts, underground parties, false bottoms. It’s like we are the underground roots of this generation, they are now sprouting out of the earth like flowers, and they want to taste the air and the sun and the rain. Nika says she doesn’t want to hide anymore. Believe me, everything’s different this time,” Roya repeats, “this time, we’re going to win.”

“Come on, Māmān,” I hear Nika call Roya.

I look at the clock. It’s almost midnight in Tehran.

“Come where?” I ask.

“I’m heading out too,” says Roya cheerfully. “We’ll talk soon. Love you.” Roya blows me a kiss and hangs up.

A raw pain hits me. I sit at my desk and try to find something to hold onto. I go onto Spotify and listen to Googoosh sing *Let us share our aloneness*. The moon shines into the room – and that one star, there is always that one star, brighter than all the others.

I listen to Googoosh and remember the first time I visited Roya in Iran, in the year 2000, I was twenty-five. I close my eyes and see myself looking for my seat on the Iran Air plane. It smells of herbs. I’m sweating and feel insecure. I had to put on a headscarf as I boarded the plane. Under my ankle-length trench coat, which I’m not allowed to put a belt around but have to button up, so that my silhouette isn’t visible, I’m wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Images come flooding back. I see myself sitting in my seat and watching the hustle and bustle around me. It’s like a fun fair. Children are playing in the aisles, the veiled stewardesses are chain-smoking. The smell of the cigarettes melds with the scent of the herbs.

I search for my Discman in my handbag, until I remember I’m not allowed to listen to music. Music is forbidden in Iran, and the Iran Air plane is already Iranian soil. I drum my sneakers on the Iranian floor beneath me and quietly sing, You come from far away to hear familiar voices. From one of the front rows, a man calls out in Persian, Poker qui misane? Who wants to play poker? Hastam. Manam. Umadam. I’m in. Me too. Coming. – I understand

every word. I feel like a stranger. I stand up to stretch my legs. I've never worn a headscarf. I've tied my hair back tightly so that the veil doesn't puff up like a shower cap. I have hair enough for five Germans, that's a quip I once heard from my headmistress at boarding school, *Young girl, you have hair enough for five Germans*. The headmistress wanted to thin out my hair. She called my father and said, *We need to thin out your daughter's hair. Jina has too much hair, it gets in the way in class and during sport*. My father was always compliant with teachers and said, *Whatever you think is right, Miss*. No way, I thought, and said, *If you dare touch a single hair, your fingers will burn for all eternity*. I was twelve and a Pippi Longstocking fan. I didn't let anyone tell me what to do, nobody. For my impertinent answer, I was grounded, had to scrub the communal bathroom for a week and stay ten minutes longer in the chapel than all the other children and say prayers, but my hair didn't get thinned out.

I'm melting under my trench coat. My jeans are glued to my legs. I wish I could just go to the bathroom and strip off all my clothes.

Opposite the toilet, men are lining up in front of a door. The Iran Air plane is arranged differently to the Lufthansa ones. Instead of the kitchenette, a big, sprawling cube has been built. Only now do I realise that each of the men is holding a little bundle in their hands. I wait until the queue clears up and step inside the cube. A prayer room, with rugs laid out on the floor. It has a slightly sour smell, and there is a big screen on one of the walls with a miniature plane showing the direction of Mecca. I really want to test out the acoustics. A stewardess rushes into the room, »Dochtaram, khānumā unwar doā mikonan«, she points to the other end of the plane, "My daughter, women pray at the other end."

It's only now that I begin to realise what I'm getting myself into. Going to a country where people can't even pray side by side. I'll have to bite my tongue, otherwise I'll put my

life in danger. I don't know what awaits me on this trip, but I know I'll have to keep my mouth shut.

I've never been good at keeping quiet. On my very first day at school I secured the reputation of being insolent. In keeping with the usual first day rituals, the director stood behind a lectern at the front of the assembly hall and called out each of the students by name to group them into their classes. The director couldn't pronounce my name, just left out the J and called me Ina. I stood up and said loud and clear, my name is not Ina, my name is Jina, and I repeated my name once more – Jina, with a J. Everyone turned around to look at me, the parents in particular craned their necks, some tried to swallow their laughter, others tried to swallow me with their eyes. I was just five years old, I was smaller than most of the other children and was missing my incisors. I could see in their eyes that they thought I was impudent, two words that were constantly thrown at me back in 1981 were insolent and impudent. For a moment, my parents wondered whether they might have enrolled me in school too early. My birthday is in October, the school year began in September, and my mother declared that I was basically six. She thought it was right not to miss an entire year of school because of a single month, and I thought it was right not to spend my entire time at elementary school being called by the wrong name. I remember the rotten deal I made with my mother. The director didn't like it at all that I had corrected him in front of everyone, even though he was the one who had pronounced my name wrong, just skipped a letter because he didn't know what to do with it. I had pointed that out to him, and that wasn't the only thing that bothered him. Every week, the director called my parents in for a meeting and complained about me, Your daughter speaks impudently in class, your daughter this, your daughter that – he avoided saying my name – if your daughter does not learn to obey the rules I am afraid you shall have to take her out of school and try again next year, perhaps it is too early for her after all. By then it was November, and I was six, like most of the other children,

apart from the late bloomers, who were already seven. I'll have a word with my daughter, my mother said to the director. And to me, Keep your mouth shut for three months, bite your tongue, whatever, I don't care, just make sure you don't say a word, just be quiet, quiet as a mouse, just three months, after that, they can't throw you out of school. My mother always pulled her eyebrows up high when she admonished me, which meant, don't you dare defy me.

I went along with the deal, kept quiet, and was allowed to stay in school.

I think about Roya, about whether she also has to bite her tongue every day in Iran?

Roya was born in Iran. She is my mother's firstborn, we don't have the same father. Roya was born in the sixties, when my mother was still able to drive around Tehran in a miniskirt and would get her hair cut in the latest *coupé Googoosh*. When my mother left Iran, she took Roya with her, of course. Roya grew up in Europe, first in Germany, then in Switzerland, until she fell in love with an Iranian in Paris, got married, and returned to Iran with her husband after their wedding.

I have never asked Roya why she decided to live in Iran.

Roya and I are very close, but she's detached from me in a way. I can't feel what she feels, I can't think what she thinks. When Nika was born, though, I felt as if it was also my daughter who had been born. Roya comes from the same body as me, Nika also has traces of me inside of her.

When the immigration officer at Imam Khomeini Airport sees my Iranian passport, he gives me a friendly smile and says, "Welcome to the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the name of God, the just and almighty. Welcome home."

There is neither a just nor an almighty god, I think, and Iran is the opposite of a republic, but I keep silent, I smile at the officer until he hands me back my passport. The immigration officer takes my joy as his own and smiles at me again in a friendly manner. I put my Iranian passport in my bag. My Iranian passport – actually, I had no Iranian passport, never did, nor did I have an Iranian birth certificate, until this trip. Then my mother suddenly insisted on sorting out my papers, saying it was a good opportunity. What papers, I asked my mother. Your Shenāsnāmè, your proof of existence, you need to get your papers sorted out while your father is still alive, otherwise you'll never get an Iranian passport. And what do I need an Iranian passport for? You never know, one day it might be of use to you. And why while my father is alive? Because he has to confirm that you are his daughter, because his name is below yours in your passport. I'd had to wear a headscarf back then as well, it was the first time I'd ever worn one. Even though the Iranian consulate is in Frankfurt, I was only allowed to enter wearing a headscarf and the obligatory silhouette-covering coat. That was my first encounter with the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the middle of Frankfurt, on Islamic soil. The government official was sceptical and also rude when he realised that I spoke Persian but was illiterate. What, you can't read? No. And write? Can you not write? I was born in Germany, I said. He said, there are Quran schools in Germany too. My mother placed her hand on top of mine. She had prepared me beforehand, telling me I should talk as little as possible, answer with yes or no wherever I could, and leave everything else to her. I said, My mother is with me, she will fill in the form for me. The official looked at my mother and said something impolite, something like, Khānum, I hope you at least taught your daughter how to cook. Oh, I cook all right, I wanted to say, but I bit down on my tongue, thought, You idiot, if all of you over there are like this, I'll have to do more than bite my tongue, I'll have to bite it clean off, otherwise I'll be arrested in a heartbeat. My mother felt the heat inside of me and placed her hand on mine again. My mother is a good actress, she can convince anyone without feeling like a traitor.

The arrivals hall is loud and black. The black is moving, hundreds of bodies wrapped in black, flowing robes, joining together to form a swarm and then dividing again, the veiled bodies rush together and then disperse, move through one another to their relatives, screaming, hugging, kissing, screaming, hugging, kissing, until I get dizzy from the back and forth. I wait by the glass door, hold on to my suitcase, and stand on my tiptoes to find Roya. Roya is not very tall, my eyes get lost a few times in the black sea before I spot my sister, she is the only one not wearing a chador.

Without saying a word, we kiss and hug each other, Roya takes me by the hand and leads me outside through the black sea. A dry heat hits me. It is midday, early April. Roya says, “The sun is behaving as if it were already summer.”

My eyes need a minute to adjust to the blinding light. Roya doesn’t let go of my hand. She says, “Come on,” leads me along a line of parked cars and then stops at a mud-brown Jeep. I look at the jeep and forget for a second where I am, thinking of *Daktari* and safaris. My sister and I didn’t have a childhood together, Roya was fourteen when I was born, but I know from our mother that *Daktari* was Roya’s favourite TV series.

I point to the jeep and say, “*Daktari* style.”

“It’s Amir’s car. I drive a piece of junk. Though this one won’t last much longer either. It’s not a style, it’s Iran, there’s nothing ‘made in the 21st century’ here, everything is old, prehistoric.” Roya crosses her eyes and sticks her tongue out. She always does that when she finds something annoying. We laugh. Roya walks towards the driver’s door and knocks on the window. A man gets out.

“Who is that?”, I ask Roya in German.

“This is Ali-Āghā,” answers Roya in Persian.

Ali-Āghā steps toward me with his gaze lowered, places his right hand flat on his heart and says “Khosh-omadin, I hope your journey was joyful.”

I nod, “Baleh, merci.”

“Ali-Āghā works for us,” says Roya in German. “I asked him to drive us. You’ll see, it’s a long trip. It took almost two hours to get here.”

“And where is Nika?” I ask.

“She’s waiting for you at home.”

“And who’s looking after her?”

“Mimi-Khānum, Ali-Āghā’s wife.”

I refrain from asking whether Nika has grown. Of course Nika has grown since she was born. Babies grow.

Roya and I sit together on the back seat and hold hands. I’m so distracted I don’t know where to look. At Roya? Out the window? The sky is so intensely blue, like in my mother’s descriptions. The soil is sand, chocolate, fire, butter. The Alborz winds along the horizon, Mount Damavand lies on top of it like a sleeping dragon, its white tip pierces so deeply into the blue that I think all the colour is going to drain out of the sky.

“How do you say April in Persian?” I ask Roya.

“Ordibèhèsht.”

“What does it mean?”

“Truth and purity.”

Roya laughs and pulls a face, as if she wants to say, everything ends up in the brainwashing basket here, even the names of the months.

“Crazy. Do all the names of the months have a religious meaning?”

Roya shakes her head. “No, not all of them, March, Farwardin, means driving force, May, Chordād, well-being, June, Tir, rain angel.”

“Rain angel?” I interrupt Roya, that’s beautiful.

“July, Amordād, immortality.”

“Seriously? July means immortality?”

“Not July, Amordād means immortality. After the revolution, the Mullahs actually wanted to change the Zoroastrian month name Amordād to Mordād, but Mordād means death, which must have been too macabre even for them.” Roya laughs and continues listing the months.

“August, Shahriwar, sovereignity, September, Mèhr, sun/friendship/love, October, Ābān, guardian of the water.”

“Am I sun/friendship/love or guardian of the water?”

“You know that in Iran, the months and the new year don’t start on the first, like in the West, but are determined by the moon. Depending on its rotation, the new month begins on what, according to your Western system, would be the twenty-first, the twenty-second, or

sometimes the twenty-third. According to Iranian calendar, you were born in the month of Mèhr, you're sun/friendship/love." Roya leans toward me, she reaches out and holds my head in her hands like she always used to when I was little, carefully but firmly, as if it might break and fall from my neck at any time. Roya kisses me on the forehead. "My sun." A tear rolls down my cheek. My headscarf has slipped down to my neck. Roya takes her hands off me. I adjust my scarf. The tear rolls past my nose and over my lips.

"Is that you or me?" I ask, laughing at my own question, when I see that we both have tears in our eyes.

"I'm so glad you're here," says Roya, "you'll see, Iran is your homeland too."

"Stop it, or I'll start to cry again."

Roya laughs. A river flows from my eyes.

Roya looks in her handbag for a tissue. I wipe my face with my hand.

"Flying always softens me. So, if I'm sun/friendship/love, is Māmān the guardian of the water?"

"Yes, doesn't suit her, does it," says Roya. "Āzar, fire, would be a better fit."

"When is fire?"

"From 22 November to 21 December, Nika is fire, then it's Dèi, creator, February is Bahman, good thoughts, and I am Esfand, modesty." Roya looks at me expectantly, obviously waiting for me to say, that suits you, so I say, "You are the incarnation of Esfand."

**[…]**

Roya opens the curtains, rich stripes of light fall into the room, onto the wooden floorboards, onto the bed I'm lying on, and along the wall to the door. "I'll wait for you in the kitchen," says Roya, and leaves the room.

I need to get my bearings first, room, window, time, door, I think about my aunts and hope I don't forget any names, Behjat, Heshmat, Shokat, Esat, Esmat, Eshrat, I still remember all of them. It occurs to me that I have to leave out Aunt Behjat. She's already dead. And Aunt Eshrat is in America. Once more from the top: Heshmat, Shokat, Esat, Esmat, Heshmat, Shokat, Esat, Esmat, Heshmat, Shokat, Esat, Esmat, I hope I don't get their names mixed up. Apart from Aunt Esmat, I don't know who is who. Aunt Esmat is the only one my father has shown me a photo of, after I had recited his sister's names to him. My father laughed proudly, his pride was directed less at his sisters than at my efforts, he was happy that I had secretly asked Aunt Eshrat to teach me the names, that I had practiced them in case I ever went to visit my aunts in Iran. If you visit your aunts in Iran, said my father, I promise that Aunt Esmat will be your favourite one. I could tell from the tone of his voice that Aunt Esmat was his favourite sister. How come? I asked my father, Why Aunt Esmat and not the others? Because Aunt Esmat stands on her own two feet, said my father. But doesn't everyone stand on their own feet? I asked. What else do people stand on? I looked down at myself and said, Look, I also stand on my own two feet. I didn't understand the metaphor, I was only five, six at most. My father explained to me that Aunt Esmat was not dependent on anybody, because she had studied and had a profession and earned her own money. Your Aunt Esmat can decide for herself about her life, explained my father. And the other aunts, I asked, can they not do that, because they don't stand on their own feet? Exactly, said my father. That's mean, so whose feet do the other aunts stand on? I didn't wait for an answer and said, I always want to stand on my own feet.

Now that I think about it, I'm touched by how sincerely my father had tried to explain the connection between money, life, and freedom to his six-year-old daughter. Look, Bābā, look how far my feet have taken me, all the way to Iran.

I throw back the covers, the light rolls from the blanket over my body. I look at my feet, feet of my freedom, come, get up.

When I walk out of the bathroom, Roya is standing at the kitchen counter holding out a glass of golden liquid to me.

"Freshly squeezed sweet lemon juice," says Roya.

I'm sceptical, how is that possible – sweet lemons? But I take the glass. Because I can't imagine lemons tasting sweet, I first smell the juice, before carefully taking a small sip. I lick my lips, wow, the juice really is sweet. I take another mouthful, I can't place the flavour, not lemon, not orange, not grapefruit, I try it again.

"Well?" asks Roya.

"Tastes delicious, almost a bit like honeydew melon," I say, and finish the rest. Roya takes the glass from me and quickly puts it in the sink.

"I haven't made you any breakfast," she says, "I'm sure you'll get tonnes of food from your aunts in a second; you have to go now, get your headscarf, don't forget your coat, I'll call you a taxi."

"Why a taxi?" I ask.

"I would drive you, but I'm not allowed to drive today, and Amir is out with his car."

I'm just about to furrow my brow when Roya explains that in Tehran, due to the high levels of air pollution, theoretically, everyone is only allowed to drive every second day, so even-numbered licence plates on Monday, odd ones on Tuesday, and so on, but everyone cheats the system, and anyone who has more than one car has even and odd plates.

"So I can't take you in my car today, but when you're done, give me a call, and Amir will come and get you."

"Can't I walk? Do you have a map?"

Roya laughs. "Nobody walks anywhere here. The city is far too big. From here to your aunts would be like walking from Wiesbaden to Frankfurt, it'll take at least twenty minutes by taxi."

"And how do people get around who don't have a car?"

"Taxi."

"Isn't that expensive?"

"Shared taxis."

"What about the bus?"

Roya shakes her head in disgust. "You feel like you're in a prison cell, the buses are divided into two zones, men at the front, women up the back, if I were you, I wouldn't do that to myself."

"Subway?"

“The subway is okay, of course it’s also separated, women’s carriages and men’s carriages, but it doesn’t go to all parts of Tehran; because of the risk of earthquakes, they don’t dare to cut a tunnel up the mountain, down in the city centre, everything is flat, you saw how steep the incline is when we drove through the city yesterday. We can take the subway when we go to the grand bazaar sometime.”

Roya sees my disappointment at not being able to explore Tehran on my own, and that I’m wondering what other options there are.

“If you really want a true Tehran experience, I’ll walk you down to Tajrish and you can flag down a shared taxi there,” Roya finally suggests, and explains to me that I need to shout my direction at the taxi driver while I’m waving him over. If my destination is on his way, the taxi driver won’t quite stop, he’ll just drive slowly, and someone inside will open the door and everyone squeezes together, and I can squeeze in beside them. “The prices are set”, says Roya, “you can’t really haggle, you say where you want to go and the taxi driver tells you what it costs, you can pay right away or when you get out, but be aware, they say the prices in tomans, but you pay in rials, whatever price they say, you have to times it by ten in your head, one toman is ten rials.”

I ask Roya if the shared taxis are also divided by gender. No! Nobody knows why there are no gender-division rules for the shared taxis, the best seat is up front, because you’re generally always on your own there, “But sometimes someone jumps into the front seat too, right onto your lap,” says Roya, which I doubt, and say, “I don’t believe you.”

What Roya didn’t mention is that one of the reasons you slide back and forth on the back seat of the shared taxi is because the entire thing is covered with a thick, slippery transparent film.

When I get in, I try not to crowd the first woman too much, then I see that there's a second woman sitting next to her, they look like sisters, older than Roya, maybe as old as my mother, I'd guess around sixty, round faces, the first one framed by a yellow headscarf, with green leaves on it, coiling around the woman's neck, the other one's headscarf is orange with brown decorations, they wear their headscarves like Grace Kelly, wrapped around their necks and tied at the back. On the orange woman's lap, two young boys are bobbing up and down, three or four years old at most, wedged in on each other, the small boys are bouncing on the orange woman's lap like she's a horse. I look ahead, the driver turns around and gives me a friendly look, he reminds me of the character Meister Eder from the children's show *Pumuckl*, his broad nose, his moustache, his peaked cap, his bushy eyebrows, the friendly smile, the portly figure, next to the driver is a young guy and a girl, I can only see the backs of their heads, the girl is sitting on the boy's lap, she's wearing a dark-blue chiffon headscarf, but not wrapped around her neck like the women next to me, it's laid loosely over her hair, the fabric is so thin that I can see her strawberry-blonde locks shimmering through.

The driver claps his hands and calls out loud, "Yāllāh," turns around to the steering wheel and steps on the gas, the yellow woman grabs me by the arm and almost pulls me on top of her, "Biāh azizam, come on, sweetheart, otherwise the door won't shut," the orange woman bends over the two of us and pulls on my other arm, which is pulling on the door handle, the two little boys slide down from her lap onto the floor by our feet, I can feel her breath on me, I break out in a sweat, droplets trickle down my back between my shoulder blades and tickle me, the headscarf is stuck to my head, it was okay on the street, but here in the taxi, my first instinct is to take off my headscarf, unbutton my coat and wind down the window, there's no sense in trying to keep my distance, I can't help but laugh at how I'm sitting here, sweating, bent over the lap of a stranger, lying on each other like cats, nose to nose with these two little boys, who respond to my laughter with their laughter.

For a moment, it seems insane to me that I can understand their language, that I speak the same language as them, that I'm as much a stranger here as I belong here. I try to edge away from the yellow woman and close the car door at the same time, the orange woman almost tears my arm off until the door finally snaps shut.

I say thank you, try to sit upright, feel with my fingers to see if my scarf is still in place, and ask if I can open the window.

"Better not," says the orange woman, "that's not air, it's poison, my grandsons here," she says bouncing the boys on her knees, "have asthma."

"Where are you from?" asks the yellow woman. The young guy and the girl turn to face me, their heads pressed against one another, they look like they're in love, I'd guess they're about the same age as me, maybe a few years younger, maybe nineteen, twenty. The boy has a delicate face, long lashes, gentle eyes, the girl has freckles sprinkled around her nose, fire in her eyes. "You're not from Tehran," the girl says to me and pushes her chin forward, as if to say, tell me where you come from. "How do you know that?" I ask the girl. "It's obvious," says the yellow woman. "How?" I ask. "Bodies can speak too," says the yellow woman and draws a silhouette in the air with her finger. "Have you ever even ridden a shared taxi before?" asks the yellow woman. The orange woman laughs: "Surely not, given how clumsily she got in."

"Hahaha," loud laughter, everyone in the taxi laughs, even the driver. "You learn to love it pretty quick, azizam, the only freedom we have left is to all ride together in a shared taxi," says the yellow woman. The orange woman sighs and invokes Allah, the yellow woman asks again, "So where are you from?" I realise that no one will leave me alone until I give them an answer. "From Germany," I say. "From Germany…", the orange woman sounds disappointed. "I prefer England." "I'm into your techno," says the young guy, "did you bring

anything with you, Kraftwerk, Väth, Spoon, Van Dyke?" The girl laughs, "How can she bring any techno records with her to Tehran." The two of them turn back to face the front. "If you want, you can put your music on," says the driver to the young guy, "my taxi is a free country." The driver glances in the rear-view mirror and looks at me. "Where in Germany?" "Munich," I answer.

"I was in Munich once, when I was young, as a student, good beer in Munich, ever since, I dream of a fresh beer, straight from the tap, what I wouldn't give for a freshly tapped beer right now, that's more than twenty years ago, and I can still taste the froth, it sits above your lip like a moustache, back then, I didn't have a moustache, ách-joon, Khodāyā, dear soul, dear god, what I wouldn't give for a beer right now."

"The most precious thing in Iran is what's missing," whispers the girl.

"Zendebād, daughter, long shall you live, you don't need to whisper that, you can say it out loud, how right you are, the most precious thing is what's missing, a bottle of water is more valuable than a canister of petrol, trees don't grow with oil, the Earth doesn't drink oil," says the yellow woman angrily and tells us that the prices at the bazaar have gone up yet again, she could sell her tomatoes from yesterday for five times the price today. The orange woman sighs, shakes her head and invokes Allah again, the girl turns to her boyfriend and kisses him on the cheek.

"Even if everything is taken from us, they cannot take away our love," says the yellow woman, patting the girl on the shoulder, "kiss each other, love each other, live…", suddenly the yellow woman frantically knocks on the driver's seat with her fist. "Here, here," calls the yellow woman. I begin to understand the rules, knocking on the driver's seat with your fist is the sign to get out. The driver hits the brakes, right in the middle of the road, in the middle of the traffic. "Yāllāh," says the driver, I hear honking, policeman's whistles, honking, I see the

traffic snaking past us, I quickly open the door and get out of the car to let the yellow woman out and almost fall into the arms of another woman who appears in front of me like a wall. Standing next to her is a man, I would guess the two of them are about the same age as Roya and Amir, he is wearing a brown, shiny suit, she is wearing a beige coat and a brown headscarf, knotted tightly under her chin, their faces look different to the Iranian faces that I know, their faces are cut differently, more elliptical, the noses flatter and longer, their eyes sit far apart, their skin is lighter, not olive-coloured, almost white, like salt rock, I know there are many peoples in Iran, I know all Persians are Iranians but not all Iranians are Persians, there are also Kurds, Balochs, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Afghans, Turkmens, Lurs, and Assyrians who are Iranians, I know that the people look different depending on the region they come from, whether they're from the edge of the desert or from the mountains, from the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, or from one of the islands, but I don't know how to tell where they come from, I just see that these two look starkly different to the ones I know, and while I'm still wondering where people could be as white as salt, the saltman shouts "Valiasr" into our taxi. The yellow woman gets out, without the orange woman, so not sisters after all, "Yāllāh, two-hundred tomans," calls the driver to the saltman and the saltwoman. I get back into the taxi. The saltwoman and saltman squeeze in beside me, they seem to be in the middle of an argument, at first, I have trouble understanding them, the saltman stretches out his syllables, it takes a while for me to understand where one word ends and the next one begins, the orange woman doesn't move an inch, she even leans her arm comfortably against the window, I break out in a sweat again, I am wedged between the arguing saltpeople and the orange woman, when I remember that I don't know my way around here and don't know when I should knock on the driver's seat to get out. I try to lean forward towards the driver, "Āghā, I don't know my way around, can you please tell me when I have to get out?"

"When I say Yāllāh, you jump out," answers the driver.

My thanks are drowned out by the argument between the saltpeople. “The days in which women spent their lives cooking are over,” says the saltwoman, angrily.

“Yes, of course, you’re right, but a good housewife should know how to run a household,” says the saltman.

“You’re talking about a maid! Women are not slaves. I am not a slave!” The saltwoman is getting more and more angry

“I never said that you’re a slave. I’m saying that you run the house,” says the saltman in a conciliatory tone.

“You think that the day a woman accepts a marriage proposal, she agrees to become her husband’s slave – I never agreed to be a maid. I never signed such an agreement” says the saltwoman. She is speaking very loudly now.

“Who runs the household? Don’t twist my words. I never said you were a slave. I’m saying it’s your job to run the household. Do you think men should run the household?” asks the saltman.

The saltwoman remains loud: “I think we help each other, we share the tasks, an apple for you, an apple for me, and if there’s only one apple, it gets cut into two equal parts, half, half, do you understand?”

“You think I should work outside the house and in the house?” asks the saltman, irritated.

The saltwoman loses her patience and snaps at the saltman, “What are you talking about, outside the house, I also work outside the house, I also have a job, just like you, where do you live, still with your camels in the caravansary? Then tell me, how many camels did

you pay for me, and where are these camels now, there are none in our garden, you vulture. You have to help out at home too, I don't even expect you to do the laundry and cleaning, but you can tidy up, you could at least pick up after yourself, do the dishes, cook, do the groceries, you, me, you, me."

Now the saltman gets angry too. "You go to work voluntarily. You're the one who decided to get a job, I'm not forcing you to go to work, you don't even earn a quarter of what I earn, it's not worth it for you to go to work, as far as I'm concerned, you can stay at home all day, you can't force me to do housework against my will, you should be grateful that you have such a modern husband who gives you permission to work outside the house. Most of my friends don't let their wives go to work, now I understand why, because then they'd be forced to do housework, don't force me…"

The young girl in front intervenes, she pinches her boyfriend on the cheek and says: "Don't you dare cultivate such views, otherwise your ass will burn." The orange woman laughs, the little boys on her lap are now bouncing up and down wildly and repeating, "Ass, ass, ass, she said ass," the saltman leans forward towards the driver, "Help me out here." "I'm staying out of it." the driver says, and steps on the brakes. For a moment, I think the driver is going to throw the saltpeople out of the taxi because of how blatantly and loudly they are arguing, but then the driver gets out himself, leaving the car in the middle of the road, honking, police whistles, honking, the traffic snakes past us, I follow the driver with my eyes, as he walks around the car to the boot and opens it up, the fighting couple have fallen silent, only the wildly bobbing boys on the orange woman's lap are still giggling happily, the driver has disappeared behind the boot, I look to the left and see a truck standing by the kerb, open on all sides, like the trucks that transport cars, filled with gas canisters, there is a man standing on the bottom level, three more are standing by the kerb. The man on the truck is passing the men on the street one gas canister after the other, now our driver reappears holding a gas

canister, he places the canister on the road beside him, reaches into his pocket, pulls out a wad of notes, throws the notes into a big bucket hanging from the rearview mirror of the truck, and grabs a new gas canister from one of the three men. Our driver disappears behind the lid of the boot again, I hear a dull thud, the whole car shakes, honking, whistles, honking, then another thud, the boot is closed, the driver comes back, and as he sits back down behind the wheel, he apologises, “Jāh-Ali, I almost forgot, forgive me, but my survival comes first, if I come home without gas again today, god help me…” The saltwoman, triumphant, “You see, husband helps wife, wife helps husband.” The saltman, triumphant, “You see, that’s what I mean by outside the house, I get the gas, you cook the food.” We turn right at a big intersection, the driver steps on the brakes, “Yāllāh, dochtar ālmāni, quick quick, German girl, out you get.”