

Woman to Woman

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Roxanna pulled into the safest spot she could find. She was certain she was in the wrong place. The Motel 8 sign shed a neon reflection flickering with a lonely buzz. She dug into her bag, sifting through her court ID, cigarettes, loose change, and the book she never got to read, until she found the index card with an address scribbled on it.

"12664 West Washington Blvd/ Room 19," she confirmed.
"This would be it."

Roxanna examined herself in the rear view mirror. The curse of beautiful green eyes was non-existent lashes and pale brows. As a young girl born in Persia, her fair complexion won Roxanna the rank of outcast among her peers. Years later, when she traveled to America to study, her exotic combination was considered intoxicating. She much preferred American tastes, even now. Thankfully, dim lighting made it easy to ignore new lines tiptoeing down any corners. Straight hair, still warm from her hairdresser's blow dry, was a new shade of auburn. She popped open her dark brown lip gloss. In mid-application, her cell phone started ringing Blondie's "Call Me" and she jumped. With subconscious ease, her hair tossed in synch with the cell phone flip.

"Hello?"

It was her husband Ali, and he was not happy.

"What? I'm busy," she snapped.

That did not make him happier.

"I told you, I'm working late tonight. There are seven new cases on my desk, and I have to hear them first thing in the morning. You're her father, figure it out yourself."

Ali was flustered because he didn't know what Arya was supposed to have for a snack before she went to bed. Arya, of course, knew, exactly what she wanted. Her little 6 year-old voice plucked instructions in the background as Ali was trying to talk. Roxanna couldn't tell him she was there to see Haleh.

Since Haleh had been cast out of their house, everything felt right again. Tired of being the first of two wives, Roxanna had longed to have her husband to herself. Iran could finally remain a memory curled deep under piles of rubble, not to be disturbed.

What the hell am I supposed to do? She asked herself. *Ali would never take Haleh back after what she had done. Who would have thought such a well trained Muslim girl would try to run away with her English instructor?* Roxanna put the car in reverse. There was nothing she could do to help the wretched situation. She belonged at home, with Ali. Before she put her foot on the gas, Roxanna shut her eyes, and breathed deep. With a frustrated groan, she put the car back into park. Could she really leave Haleh in such a place, when once, her own life throbbed with the threat of last chances and Haleh carried her without hesitation?

The fog was dark but it was lifting. The glass in Roxanna's hand was empty again. Her face stuck to the cold tile floor. Thick velvet curtains kept out anything fresh. She laughed to herself. There was a bottle of Vodka waiting for her,

even in revolutionary Iran. But she would have to get up, walk through the living, to get to it. Step by step the movement outside would be a new summons, but she was still in mourning. She curled her knees to her and wrapped herself in a false blanket of lost things. Women can't be judges, the new power said, not even lawyers. Go home, they advised with a hiss of accusation, and be a wife to your husband, a mother to your children. They could not know, of course, and she would never tell. Ali had once confessed, just before their first kiss, that he didn't want children. If any part of her had been unsure, those words seduced her. Three years later, when they were wed, he promised her coming back home would be the last thing he ever asked of her, and she was lured. The law, in post monarchical Iran, decreed that before a second wife was had, the first must consent. Roxanna's mouth stuck to itself, begging for the bitter sting of anything numbing, but she could tell Haleh was in the garden, playing with the damned birds. Wife number two, favored by all, and herself almost a child. Better stay still. The room was not cooperating. Sliding between sleep and nausea she passed what must have been hours. Roxanna suddenly felt small hands guiding her to sit. Her head pretended to be a carnival ride, and she crumpled over. Haleh helped her up again. Roxanna's joints creaked, and, somehow, that slight young girl held her weight as they shuffled somewhere. Fresh air smacked her skin, and she shut her eyes as natural light forced itself on her. Roxanna sat on a stone bench. From above, cages creaked delicately in the breeze. The birds inside sang a nauseating sweet melody.

"See," Haleh said. "Some of us who are caged can still find music."

With a weightless love, Haleh opened one of the cage doors. A small canary hopped out onto her finger.

"She has learned to tell fortunes, this one," Haleh cooed proudly. She took a small box full of folded papers and put it in front of her canary. It cocked its head to the side, chirped and hopped onto the box. With a blank stare, it poked a sharp beak through the jumble and picked out a fortune carefully, fluttering back onto Haleh's finger and trading the paper for a small piece of fig.

"Do you want to know what it says?"

Roxanna wanted to go back inside. Haleh unfolded the paper.

"In the hope of union, my very life, I'll give up. •As a bird of Paradise, this worldly trap I will hop," she read with a crystal laugh.

Hafiz, Roxanna thought. How fitting. Roxanna sat in the garden, and allowed the girl to bring her tea, let the birds sing their songs. She didn't drink the tea, or hear the sounds, but the fog was leaving, and she was letting it go.

Roxanna wrapped manicured hands around the steering wheel resting her forehead on them. Her three-carat diamond dug itself into her skin. Hopping out, she activated the alarm, deactivated it to be sure it had worked, and reactivated it again.

Room number 19 was on the second floor. She grabbed her purse close to her chest and peered into dark corners in front of

her. Her daily hour at the gym allowed for a doe like sprint up the unlit staircase. Nineteen, nineteen, she went the wrong way twice before she finally found it. The door was cracked.

"Haleh?" she asked. "It's me."

There was no answer. There was no light either.

"Haleh?"

She felt along the wall until she found a switch. The dingy room looked untouched. Dripping water tapped evenly from somewhere in the back. A musty smell crept past her into clean night air. On the orange comforter of the bed closest to the door, a black chadorⁱ was neatly folded. Haleh's family's Qur'anⁱⁱ was beside it, a stark white envelope perched on top. Roxanna's name was written on the front, in Haleh's handwriting. A tendril of alarm stretched awake, reaching up Roxanna's spine for the hairs on her neck. She sat on the bed, and with shaking hands, opened the envelope.

I hope this ends things between us. What it begins for you I cannot say. I miss Iran. I miss my garden. It was your garden once, wasn't it. I actually felt sorry for you then. It was my duty, as second wife, to bear his children, and help you prepare his home. But you showed no interest in him, or me. I was relieved that you stayed out of my way. But I see now that if you could have given him Arya, he would never have come looking for me. You should know, I tried to make him put you aside, but he would not. You should know that. Ali promised me a garden here. Los Angeles doesn't have gardens. I wonder if he knew that. I suppose you are stronger than I am. You would never do

this. You left your life in America to come home to Iran with Ali. And you made a new life there. Before the revolution, you were a judge. I was so scared of you, an Iranian woman judge. And when the Mullahs came, you survived them. And when Ali told you he wanted me, you survived us both. They don't have good pomegranate in California. Ali promised me they would, but it isn't the same. I remember, as a child, running through the summer orchards. The fruit was round and plump and redder than anything I'd ever seen. Here, the fruit has no character. I don't have a home anymore do I? After this, my father will not have a daughter named Haleh. What does he need with his youngest, when he has two upstanding elder daughters to be proud of? But tell him I remember, I remember everything he taught me. I am no longer a Muslim. But, I am still his daughter. When he can stomach it, ask him to think of me. As for Ali, tell him that I am sorry. Ask him to forgive. I should have done as he wanted, and taken off my Hijabⁱⁱⁱ. Walked in the sunshine with my hair free. But I could not. I should have honored my husband and told anyone who rose a brow that I was your sister. I should have stayed quiet when Ali took you to the courts to adopt my Arya. He was right to do it. Without you, our daughter would have been a bastard with no place. Everyone has to have a place. I should have done many things differently. But I could not. I could not. Tell him that I never meant to betray him. That the longer I stayed here, the more I lost, and to my worthless shame another man's trickery found me. A man who did not look around the room at anything but me. A man who seemed to me so beautiful and young compared to my stern Ali, almost my father's age. He promised things that he never meant to. Now, I am left. Tell him

that I know what a foolish thing I have been. Tell Ali that my being his wife, and Arya's mother, were the sweetest things in my life. I know that hurts you, but you have them both now. Please, tell him. There is one last thing between us. You will be Arya's mother, and I am glad. You will see that she is strong, and she will find happiness. But teach her, please, help her to remember who I am. Ali will want her to forget, and I don't blame him. But I ask you, woman to woman, to whisper in her ear when he is not looking. Whisper that her mother loved her, even as she left. Either way, whether you do these things or not, for me, it is finished. The rest is yours. I am a daughter of Allah, and by his will, may he forgive my crime against him.

Haleh Robadi Aryanpur

Roxanna couldn't breathe. She crumpled the paper in a balled fist, and looked around the room waiting for some sign of what to do next. Her heart paced angrily, wishing to be free of her ribcage. A damp pat, pat, pat reached her throbbing ears. She looked to the direction of the sound. On shaky legs, Roxanna walked to the bathroom. She turned the knob, opened the door, and fell to her knees. Haleh's thick curtain of carbon hair fanned weightless atop a sheet of cooled water. Her emptied eyes stared straight ahead. Sliced wrists bobbed up and down in a brimming tub. The round swell of a newly growing stomach broke the water's surface. Roxanna screamed. She crawled to the bathtub. Pulling her self up, she put one hand on Haleh's pregnant belly, the other on her own barren womb. Her wedding band glimmered where droplets touched it. Through wasted tears

she wondered who was to blame. It was then, among the steamy pitch of moist air, that she saw herself in the mirror, dripping, disappearing under a film of mist. She sat on the toilet, hugging the crumpled letter to her chest. Rocking back and forth, she willed her body to get up, call someone. But the letter was a weight she could not lift.

Suddenly, wings fluttered above Roxanna's head, infusing stagnant air. One of Haleh's canaries perched above the bathroom door preening citrus feathers. Roxanna's eyes shrank from the bright plumes. Looking away, she saw Haleh. Hidden beneath the lifeless face lurked a reflection of the little girl who at this very moment was wrapped up in bed listening to her father read her favorite story. Roxanna dropped on all fours. She began to mop up the floor with almost white towels. Thickened water inched through her pants, staining her pale skin. What the hell was she going to tell Arya? What was she going to tell Ali? She scrubbed harder, her hair curling as it clung to her face, beads of sweat dripping off her forehead. When she had no more towels left, she threw them in a pile under the sink. "God Damn it!" she screamed. Someone walking by outside paused, and Roxanna stopped breathing. Motionless, she prayed for the stranger to walk on. When they did so, she quickly ran to the door and bolted it shut. She then drained the tub and wrapped Haleh in her Hejab as best she could, making sure to cover her face. With the bird's cage set on floor, gate open, Roxanna waited. The bird finally hopped in, as Roxanna knew it would. Cross legged, on the soiled Motel 8 bathroom floor, she pulled the birdcage closer. The dripping water mercilessly kept its pace and Roxanna shut her eyes, head cradled in her hands. The bird

started singing. Chaste chords seemed full of hope and Roxanna recalled the syrup scent of Haleh's roses. Velvet blooms had come to life under her young enthusiasm, bursting where once only weeds could grow. That garden had always belonged to Haleh. Blondie chimed a muffled "Call Me" from her purse. Roxanna edged a laugh. She rose and pulled herself together. She wiped the mirror with her sleeve, and tried to remove the streaks of makeup marking her tear stained face. Roxanna stole one last touch of the wet stunted life beneath the black robe stuck to Haleh's limbs. She kissed the abandoned girl limply on her forehead. Roxanna left the Motel with Haleh's bird, her letter, and her Koran, which would be given to Arya, when the time was right. Arya, she thought, and began to walk faster, breaking into a run. She needed to get home and hold her daughter before she fell asleep.

ⁱ an outer garment worn by some Iranian women when they venture out into public; it is one possible way in which a Muslim woman may follow the Islamic hijāb dress code A chador is a full-length semi-circle of fabric open down the front. It is thrown over the head and held shut in front. A chador has no hand openings or closures but is held shut by the hands or teeth or by wrapping the ends around the waist.

ⁱⁱ The central religious text of Islam

ⁱⁱⁱ The Arabic term for "cover" (noun), based on the root **حج** meaning "to veil, to cover (verb), to screen, to shelter"