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UNDER A PAPERY ROOF: A MEMOIR ABOUT LIFE IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN AND EXILE

BY PAMTEHA SAMATI

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The time is when nothing stirs. A couple of hours into the curfew, there is little movement in the streets. It's dark, and an eerie kind of silence creeps over every building, back alley and courtyard. This silence is not by choice. This stillness smells and feels like fear; a terror so immense that even the bravest are not immune to it. This fear is not because we know that Iraq is raining its bombs on us tonight, but a fear of what we may see, and how we may cope when the bombers have finished their mission.

Soon, the sirens are ejecting people out of the warmth of their sleep-nests in the heart-throbbing panic of sudden waking to terror. We know what to do because my parents have taught us that when the sirens sound, we must descend to the basement where we wait the warning out. Farnaz, our landlord's daughter, and I find each other amongst the other two families. We are in our pajamas and fortunately for us, our childhood innocence conceals from our minds the real and potential consequences of evenings such as this. We are just glad to see each other when we would otherwise be dreaming. In the thinning light of a flashlight, we play games and eat sunflower seeds as the grown-ups quietly chat in another dark corner. Even our shadows move cautiously on the walls. Later, we emerge to our surface existence, unscathed, but unwittingly curtailing our favorable odds on the next attack.

The next day at school, we have the same drill, so we line up, and go to the bomb shelter and sit against chalky textured walls which are still damp and smell of new construction. This is not a real bomb shelter, but the safest wing of the school. When, after a few moments I gain composure and observe my surroundings, I realize that a few of the girls' headscarves have slipped back, exposing their hair, but the gravity of this moment is momentarily swallowing in its vortex all concerns about Islamic modesty.

At home, it's eight thirty at night. My mother, who has a hunch about another attack, has been calling my father at his office, but neither he, nor his secretary is answering. While we wait for my father, my uncle and his new wife, Mina, come over. Within moments of their arrival, as if their footsteps shattered some fragile universal silence, the sirens are screaming and warning everyone of another Iraqi bomb attack. This indiscriminate blaring of the alarms is what will forever be etched onto my mind, albeit unbeknownst to me at the time. The siren starts as a howling crescendo and reaches a macabre roar. Once again, Tehran closes its eyes. Where is my father? If I wish for his arrival hard enough, will he walk through the door? I feel as though I am naked, exposed. Later, when I have had a chance to grasp the intensity of these seconds, I will call this sensation insecurity. But for now, my thoughts are muddled as if I am two separate people; my body is in the house, but my mind is roaming the dark, empty streets, helplessly searching for my father.

The three adults stand in front of the large window of my parent's bedroom, and I can only see their silhouettes when my eyes adjust to the darkness that surrounds us. I watch the outline of my aunt's round belly against the star-speckle sky contaminated with jet fuel and hatred. In the distance, I hear muffled explosions. A few seconds later, the earth quivers and the window follows in its wake.

Holding her belly, my aunt weeps silently and murmurs "Will I live to raise this child?" Another flash and a quiver. And then another. My sister, Paki, and I are standing in the doorway. When we feel the next vibration, we let out stifled screams which are quickly dissolved in the stillness of the room. I lick the tension from around my lips. Keeping their eyes on the sky, the adults order us to get under the bed. We try, but the bed's metal frame is too low to the ground. I cry and laugh at the same time. Maybe because I know that taking shelter under a bed is futile, even ridiculous; but perhaps this moment has robbed me of rational thought and emotions befitting our predicament.

Paki and I wriggle like silver fish, trying to bury our heads under the bed. We give up. Oblivious, we wait for nothing and everything. Until we are numb. Then asleep.

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Panteha Sanati was born in Iran, and despite having lived in the United States for 22 years, she describes her condition as "an ideological straddling of two cultures, where the cultural chasm does not get any shallower with the passage of time." In 2003, she traded the semi-arid landscape of California for the verdant contours of Massachusetts when she and her partner moved to the east coast. She says that the colorful cadence of the seasons inspires her and helps preserve her memories. An English professor by day; in her free time, she explores creative nonfiction, poetry, fiction, humorous commentary, and academic essays.