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Belonging

by Nahid Rachlin

Lynn turned the pages of *Tehran News* as she sat behind the counter at Hafez Hotel. She was filling in for the night receptionist; as the hotel's manager she found herself doing a variety of tasks. Her eyes became riveted on reports of several arrests. One man had been accused of instigating an uprising at Tehran University demanding the release of a jailed newspaper publisher, another had participated in a demonstration that was opposed to the enforcement of the *hejab*. Day after day, for a year now, Lynn had been waiting for the news about the arrest of the person who put the bomb in the station wagon that her husband was driving, killing him. Perhaps she would have some peace with that closure. The bomb had been very small, the kind that the police described to her as a "sticky bomb" because the bomber could just attach it to something.

A disheveled young man came to the counter and asked for a room. She looked up from the newspaper. He seemed tense and kept shifting in his place.

"Yes, we have a single room available on the second floor," she said after checking the reservation book.

The man kept his gaze averted as he said, "That's fine."

Something about him wasn't right. She signaled to the porter who was standing in the corner of the lobby and he came over and accompanied the man to his room. The night receptionist, a burly young man with a twisted mustache, came in just then. "Lynn *Khanoom*, you're so kind to have covered for me," he said.

In a few moments she left for her apartment, just a few blocks from the hotel. Now past midnight, the streets were freer from the maddening Tehran traffic. In the relative quiet she could hear the gurgle of water in the wide *joob* that ran along the street and the rustling of sycamore tree leaves as a breeze blew through them. The heavy pollution that hung in the air like a dark cloud during the day had lifted and some stars were visible in the sky; a crescent moon dangled among them.

In the lobby of her small apartment building a few male tenants were sitting on the sofa, talking heatedly about the inflation, blaming America's sanctions for it. Lynn didn't always approve of the policies of her native country and a rush of guilt came over her, hearing the men.

As she entered her apartment she was struck by loneliness. Photographs of Karim and herself were everywhere, making her keenly aware of his absence. One, taken at their wedding three years ago stood on her dresser. They had their arms around each other and were looking into each other's

eyes.

After taking a shower she went to bed, pulling up the patchwork quilt that Karim's mother had made for them. For close to two years she and Karim had shared this bed, lain under the colorful quilt, and talked about their future dreams. They would have children; she would go to America to give birth, so that the children would be citizens of both countries.

On the wall across from the bed was a miniature painting that Karim had given to her as a present when they just started seeing each other. It had the picture of a man and a woman in an embrace sitting by a stream in the shade of a cypress tree, holding goblets of wine. Karim had said to her, "That was the Iran that celebrated life." He recited poems by ancient Iranian poets who approved of drinking wine and dancing, who believed in pleasure on this earth, rather than waiting for paradise to fulfill their desires.

More scenes of the past paraded before her eyes keeping her up... She had come to Tehran on a six month appointment to work on an exhibition in a gallery that had just opened up and its aim was to introduce modern European and American painters. She had seen the ad for the job on the bulletin board of the college from which she had just graduated with an art degree and then started working in its art shop. The job advertised was arranged through an Iranian cultural organization collaborating with an American one. The organizations were promoting Iran's then-president Khatami's dialogue of civilizations, an effort to mend the strained relationship between the two countries. Visas were offered to Americans who were employed for specific jobs.

Her college in Pella, Iowa emphasized exposure of students to other cultures. Writers, scholars, historians from different countries were invited to give talks. International literature and art were emphasized. The exposure had filled her with a travel thirst. This was her chance to see another part of the world and at this particular time she really needed to get away. Her boyfriend, Eric, had left her. She had other, more immense losses and tragedies too. Judy, her only sibling, a-year-and-a-half younger than herself, had gone into deep depression during her junior year. She had been drinking and been very promiscuous during that period. Then she had jumped off a rock ledge into a lake; whether she had done that in sobriety or drunkenness had never been established. Then, not long after that both her parents died, her father of heart attack and her mother of pancreatic cancer.

One night, soon after her arrival in Tehran, a block of ice settled on her heart, as the memories of her losses crowded her mind. She could not bear living for another moment. Impulsively she left the residential hotel she lived in then, provided by her job, and wandered around the streets aimlessly. As she walked on the narrow, cobble-stoned streets the high walls were closing in on her. She had come all the way to the other side of the world and yet she couldn't shake off what she had brought with her. Was she ever going to? It seemed impossible, in her dark state of mind. As she walked on, her eyes caught a bridge high over a wide, deep, stream. She went to the bridge and leaned over the railing, contemplating jumping in, as she imagined her sister had on the ledge over the lake. She stared at the colorful reflection of lights on the surface of the water and all she could think about was: jump. Jump in, let your lungs fill with water, float for a while

and then go down and down to the bottom.

“Is something wrong?” she heard a male voice saying in Farsi, which she had learned some in preparation for this trip. But she didn’t turn around.

“You look distressed, Miss.”

She was silent.

“Are you American?” he asked, switching to English.

“Leave me alone,” she said, staring at the water.

“It isn’t safe for you to stand here at this time of the night. Let me walk you to where you live.”

She just stared at the water.

“Please let me help you,” he said.

She finally gave in; his voice, warm and compassionate, was already helping to melt some of the ice on her chest. They began to walk towards the hotel; the back streets, except for stray cats, were empty. After walking for a few moments, they told each other their names. Then she told him why she was in Iran, her job; he told her he was going to school getting a degree from Tehran Culinary Institute and working part time for the Food Bank.

They crossed over to a street, lined by jewelry shops which were closed now but the gold, studded with precious stones, glittered in their windows. At the end of the street they reached a tea house, where men were sitting together, smoking water pipes. Teenage boys stood under streetlights or doorways, talking and laughing. One of them began to whistle softly; *I’m only fourteen, full of dreams. Bright dreams like stars against a black sky.*

A few doors down stood a cafe. “Do you want some tea and pastry?” Karim asked.

She nodded, dreading to go back to her room. Café Oasis was filled with mostly foreign men or couples-- French, Japanese. The manager had taken a chance in the decor by putting posters of Michael Jackson and Paul Newman on the walls. The furniture was sleek, yellow and blue Formica.

As soon as they sat down Karim ordered for them. They alternated speaking in English and Farsi. They each knew enough of the other’s language to communicate well. She liked his eyes, soft brown, filled with compassion, like his voice. The saffron colored sweater he was wearing over imitation Levi jeans was flattering against his olive skin. He told her he wished the relationship between Iran and America would mend, that an American presence would blow away some of the darkness settled on Iran. He filled her in with his work, his family life. He said people donated food to the banks all over the world and then employees delivered them to families most in need. When Iran and Iraq were at war his father had fought on the front and was killed. His mother lived with one of his four sisters who was also widowed. When she told him about all her losses, he listened

thoughtfully and said, "You can't always escape tragedy, wherever you live."

It was midnight when they left the café. By the door of her hotel he wrote down her phone number there as well as her cell phone number. He said, "I'll call you." But she didn't hear from him for two weeks. Then one evening when she came into the lobby she found him sitting on a sofa. He was reading the *Kian Bilingual Daily*. He looked up and saw her. "I went to Shiraz to see my grandmother and a few cousins." Before they parted he invited her to his apartment on Friday evening. "There aren't many places we can be together without harrassment,," he said.

His apartment, the one she lived in now, was small but had a view of the Alburz Mountains, making it seem spacious. An Isfahan carpet with bird designs covered the floor. He ordered food up and lit candles in copper holders on the wooden dining table. He opened a bottle of wine which he said he obtained from an Armenian vendor.

"The underground market is as big as the legal one," he said, referring to the forbidden wine.

"Yes, I've noticed."

They moved to the sofa and kissed.

"You have such pretty hair, like a gold waterfall. I love your eyes too," he said. "They're like the blue sea." He was talking like men in soap operas but nothing could make him ordinary for her.

They started seeing each other regularly. After work she usually went to his apartment. One evening, three months after they met, he proposed. He held her to him and said, "Oh Lynn, I'm madly in love with you. The moment I saw you I was stung."

"I'm in love with you too," she said. "I've never been so much in love."

"My mother and aunt keep trying to find a wife for me but I never like the girls they choose," he said.

He didn't mind that she had previous boy friends, that his future bride wasn't a virgin. "Everything about you is good," he said earnestly.

She didn't say, "We've known each other only for three months." She had known Eric, since they were in junior high school yet it hadn't worked out between them.

"The only marriage that's accepted here legally is one performed by a Muslim priest. I'm sorry about it Lynn."

She was a little hesitant to commit to that. Not that she had anything against Islam; she wouldn't like to marry in her own Dutch Orthodox religion either. Why did love have to be sanctioned by religion?

"It's just for practical purposes," he said.

His mother and aunt were traditional Muslims, but they were tolerant, kind, and welcomed her, expressed gratitude that she was willing to go along with the Muslim ceremony. They were soft spoken, gentle women and adoring of Karim. It was clear they would approve of almost anything he did.

The house was in an old section of Tehran with mosques and public baths and small rose gardens visible on almost every block, creating a mystical atmosphere that she found soothing. A Muslim priest and a notary came in to perform the legal ceremony. Then there was a reception a little later in a garden restaurant where Karim's friends and numerous relatives came to celebrate. People brought generous gifts-- jewelry, silver filigree tea glass holders, a tray engraved with trellis design, hand made quilts, a table cloth and napkins with embroidery at their edges.

Living with Karim and all the companionship she had with his family members who embraced her warmly, making friends with women some of whom had married Iranian men too, gradually helped heal her feelings of loss. Working at the hotel, a job she started after her appointment at the gallery ended, was rewarding. Since she took on the position she brought on many changes. Instead of artificial flowers, she had fresh bouquets delivered regularly for the lobby. She put in motion repairs of whatever was old and seedy. The faded and chipped marble floors were repaired, the canopy replaced, the doors painted. She aimed to keep the hotel's old charm along with modernizing it. She went to shops in the labyrinthine grand bazaar and found bronze and copper items with intricate designs on them, and miniature paintings with ornate frames, and had them hung on one of the walls in the lobby.

Everything was going smoothly. Then one evening Karim came home, looking preoccupied. "I have to deliver something tomorrow, will you come with me?"

"What is it?"

"Canned food from Food Relief. I have to deliver it to some people; they will send it to the families most in need. There's so much poverty." He said Food Bank had lent him a large station wagon for the purpose.

In the morning they drove on roads outside of the city for two hours and then he stopped the car in front of a house on an empty, quiet street. He got out and rang the bell. A few men came to the door; Karim said something to them and the men helped him carry the large package out of the car and into the house. He came back to the car shortly but he looked flushed, shaken.

"Karim, what happened, what's wrong?"

"I just wonder if these people really deliver the food to the needy. There's so much corruption." He put his arm around her. "Lynn, what you and I have together is more important than anything else."

Then there came the tragedy. A few nights later he was late coming home. Hours went by and he didn't return. She didn't like to call him unless necessary, since he often stayed in his office after his work hours to study.

He still had one year left to get his degree from the culinary institute. He had told her it would be ideal if he could set up a restaurant in Hafez Hotel and be its chef.

As more time went by and he hadn't called or returned she became seriously worried. She called his cell phone but it was off and she could only leave a message. Then she tried his work number but no one answered. She turned on the TV to a news channel and watched with trepidation for reports of any accidents.

Finally she decided to call one of Karim's friends, Fereydoon, he spent most time with. She reached Fereydoon's answering machine and left an urgent message for him to call her back. Then she called Masood, another of Karim's close friends. A message on his answering machine said he was out of town for a week. She decided not to call Karim's mother or aunt or sisters, since they would be really upset; anyway he rarely visited them late at night.

She was about to call one of the couples she and Karim socialized with but just then the phone rang. It was Fereydoon. "I'm sorry, Lynn... terrible news..." His voice cracked.

Her heart skipped a few beats. There was silence, then sounds of weeping.

"What's wrong, you're frightening me."

"Karim... explosives went off in the station wagon he was using to deliver food." "Explosives?" The world began to swim around her.

"He didn't make it alive to the hospital. I had a call from the police. They found my phone number in his address book, in his pocket."

She started to sob.

"He's no longer in the hospital; they're on the way to the morgue near Rey."

"I want to see him, I can't believe it..."

"The police said we have to wait until we hear from him. I'll come to your apartment right now."

She was frozen to her spot; she had a strange, painful sensation that she was looking at her life in a blurry mirror. Fereydoon lived only a few blocks away and arrived quickly. They kept talking, speculating, crying. Near dawn the phone ringing interrupted them. She dragged herself to the side table and picked it up. It was the police station. They wanted her to identify Karim's body in the morgue. In a few moments a policeman arrived to take her there. He allowed Fereydoon to come along. She and Fereydoon sat in the back of the police car as they raced through the sparse dawn traffic.

At the morgue the policeman took both of them inside. Seeing Karim lying in the ice cold room, his face shattered, made his death all too real. "Yes, that's him," she said. Fereydoon repeated the same thing. The policeman took them to the station. Another policeman joined them and began to question them.

“Do you know if he was involved in any political groups or organizations?” the second policeman asked.

She shook her head no, so did Fereydoon. After asking a few more questions the police let them go. No details were told to them, no arrests were made yet. It was already nine in the morning and the offices were open. She and Fereydoon went to an office to file a death certificate. Karim’s death was declared to be accidental.

The hardest part then was her calling Karim’s mother and telling her what happened. She had waited this long because she couldn’t bring herself to. But now with the finality of his death quite sunk into her, she had to make the phone call.

At the funeral she along with his mother and all the relatives and friends cried hysterically, the sound of their weeping mingling, creating a dark chorus. In the midst of her pain she was aware of how this communal mourning lightened the burden of grief somewhat. When her sister, and then her parents died, she had few people to share the grief with.

For the days to come Karim’s friends, mother and aunt and other relatives, all tried through their connections in the mosques, the bazaar shops, different offices, to find a lead to who and why the bomb had been put in the station wagon. Had it been even aimed at Karim or someone else and what the motive was. But nothing.

In the morning when she reached the hotel, the beggar, Hadaghe, a middle aged, scrawny looking woman, wearing a dust covered *rupush*, was sitting across the street with her bronze bowl on the ground in front of her. She often came into the lobby and asked Lynn for charity. Lynn always gave her some money.

“Lynn *khanoom*, a man was prowling around the hotel’s basement. He ran away as soon as he saw me. He looked very suspicious.”

Lynn did not know if she could believe the half-crazed woman who often talked to herself, rambling about how she had once been rich and how everything was taken away from her by scoundrels in her own family, how she had murdered her beloved sister’s husband because he was abusing her.

Then she felt a fear in her heart as she thought of the strange, suspicious looking man who had checked into the hotel the night before. Could he be the man who had put the explosives in Karim’s car and now was perhaps going to put some in the hotel? But why?

She went into the lobby and looked at the reservation book and saw that the man had checked out. She called the police in hotel’s precinct and asked the policeman who answered if someone would come and inspect the basement.

Within the hour three policemen arrived. “We searched every corner, there’s nothing suspicious there.”

On the way home that day, Lynn felt a rush of homesickness for the sights and sounds of Pella, for the time before things became difficult and painful for her there. Pella had maintained the architecture from the time of the original Dutch settlers-- bold curving forms and rich ornamentation, yellow sandstone and red brick buildings. There were windmills at almost every corner, their blades going round and round. In May as tulips burst into bloom in public gardens and parks, a festival was held there with parades, stage performances. Dutch street organ music, dancing, were a part of the festival. The Dutch bakery served coffee to visitors. The fall was the harvest season with a flower and quilt show. She thought, I should return home. Then her resolution weakened. Isn't this where I belong now? What is left for me in Pella? She thought of that day on the trip she and Karim had taken to Ramsar, the picturesque ancient village by the Caspian Sea; as they walked on the beach, she had said to Karim, "You saved my life." Alas she hadn't been able to save his. But living here, in his homeland, he was with her in so many ways.

Nahid Rachlin's publications include a memoir, *Persian Girls* (Penguin), four novels, including *Foreigner* (W.W. Norton), and a collection of short stories, *Veils* (City Lights). Her individual short stories have appeared in some 50 magazines. One of her stories was produced by Symphony Space, "Selected Shorts," and was aired on National Public Radio stations around the country. Her work has been translated into Portuguese, Dutch, Arabic, and Farsi. She has held Doubleday-Columbia Fellowship (Columbia) and a Wallace Stegner Fellowship (Stanford). The grants and awards she has received include the Bennet Cerf Award, PEN Syndicated Fiction Project Award, and a National Endowment for the Arts grant. For more please click on her: Website:

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