

CHAPTER 6

When I was young I had very vivid dreams. I once dreamt of waiting in a long line to see God. While waiting an old man spoke to me. After he left, I asked, “Who was that?” and someone told me “That was God”. I would often dream of angels and people I had known who had passed away. Sometimes there were romantic dreams, too, where I would be wooed by Bollywood and Hollywood movie stars from foreign countries.

I had nightmares, too. When I got migraines or a head cold I would dream I was stuck and something horrific was chasing me. I spent the whole dream screaming for help and trying to run from it. Only I couldn’t scream, and I couldn’t run. My mouth was wide open and though I could feel the effort of my screams scraping against my throat, I couldn’t make a sound.

When the war started, my nightmares increased. I sometimes would read all night not to sleep. I would do anything to stay awake. Dying in your sleep is still dying.

In August 1988, when I was 16, the war between Iran and Iraq ended. A chemical bomb attack, one of the deadliest in human history, massacred more than 5,000 Kurdish people. The devastation was so shocking that it ended a senseless war leaving a trail of heartbreak and destruction. Tens of thousands of innocent civilians were murdered, and the survivors were left with a ruined economy, shattered hopes and emotional injuries that would live forever in their hearts.

As people stumbled through the rubble of their lives, my cousin Ramin was executed for crimes against the Islamic regime. A beautiful, intelligent young man who believed in freedom of speech and beliefs, Ramin was only eighteen when he was arrested for protesting and making “mischief”. After years of imprisonment and tearful visits from family he was executed without notice. My aunt and uncle received a call one afternoon and were told he had been put to death

days before. My beloved country had become a prison, with no law and no soul. Not only had I been sexually assaulted that year, but I also had to endure the utter destruction of my previous life. At least, the end of the war and death of Ramin meant I could freely express the anger and pain I had been holding back since I moved in with Lida. In a way, I was in prison, too.

I dreaded the thought of having to go home after school. I had all kinds of excuses – after school activities and such – and it meant I could have a few more hours of safety from God knows what plans Lida had plotted to make my life more unpleasant. I spent a lot of time in my room. I'd claim I had a migraine, or a big school assignment. I stopped eating and my grades went down. I rarely slept, in case he knocked on the door again. People started to notice that something was wrong with me. My French teacher, Madame Fischer, who also was my tutor, became my confidante, and I told her about my brother-in-law's attempted rape. She asked if I wanted to sue him, and I said no. I didn't want to ruin the family, like Ahmad said.

I described the event in my journal, exactly the way it happened. My journal was my best friend, and I don't think I would have survived without it. I hid it in the back of my closet. When I was forced to leave my room for meals or some other unavoidable reason, I tried to act normal and not talk too much with Ahmad or be with him in the same room. I took a job at a café that was owned by another Persian family, serving cappuccino and sandwiches. It kept me busy and I was earning money, but because the commute was too long, I eventually had to quit.

This purgatory lasted almost a year. Then, one day I came home after school and saw my open journal on the table. My sister sat quietly, smoking a cigarette, her hands shaking. Then she looked up, glaring at me.

“Is this true?” she said, stabbing my diary with her index finger.

“Yes,” I said, my voice shaking. I felt like my soul was leaving my body.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she screamed.

“It is all there. He said it would ruin your family,” I said looking at my feet, “and you were about to have a baby. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Khaffe sho! Stop talking. Don’t you think I see you’re acting different. I’m not blind.” She slapped the diary closed. “I know that he’s that way,” she said. “But a sister isn’t what I need right now. I need a father for my children.” Silence. “Boro gomscho. Get away.”

I went to my room and sat on my bed. I didn’t know what to think or expect. Then my door flew open.

“And if you open your filthy mouth about this to anyone, I will tell them that you are a whore who seduced my husband. I will tell your father.” All of a sudden, he was *MY* father. “I will tell him that you are an embarrassment to the family.” With that, she turned and walked away. “The sight of you disgusts me,” she said as she disappeared. “I wish you had never come here. I should send you back to Iran.” I closed my bedroom door noiselessly and locked it behind.

For days following Lida’s violation, she would strike at me with her venom. “I knew that’s why you cut your sleeping gown short. Just to seduce him.” I didn’t dream of locking my door now. I imagined she would have gone ballistic, so I mostly locked it when everyone was asleep. During the day, she would enter my room whenever she wanted. I started praying, which I had been reluctant to do before, and when she caught me she laughed, saying, “Do you think God will listen to you? Dirty, little whore.”

She didn’t speak to me unless she wanted to say something vile and disrespectful. It mostly happened when I left my room to get water or food. Any time she saw me she would mutter under her breath or scoff and curse my presence. “Now, I have to feed you, too?” she

would say. If we happened to cross paths when I left to go to school or work, she'd tell me, "Get out of my face, you whore. You need to move out."

Three months after our confrontation, Lida came to me and said, "You have to get out."

"How?" was all I could ask.

"I don't care. You have to leave," she told me.

Somehow, during this time I had gone from being sixteen to being seventeen. But the law in Germany does not allow young people under eighteen years old to live alone. The situation was dire. Shelters were a dangerous place so I needed someone who would foster me until I was old enough to be on my own. I went to Madame Fischer and she gave me the number of an organization called *Leine Lotsen Diakonishes Werk*. They support and protect young people in troubled times. With their help I made arrangements with a woman named Sylvia to stay with her until I could move out on my own.

It would take about a month for the paperwork to be processed and everything made official. I told Lida I would be moving out but it wasn't fast enough for her. Every day she complained and questioned what the reason was for the delay. I attended school during the day and packed at night.

With two days left until my move my things were ready and so was I. To call it relief seems wrong but I can't deny that that emotion was mixed in with my fear of what was to come and the numbness that clouded my outlook. One of the last times I saw Ahmad in that apartment he was changing the lock on the front door. He had been working late these past months and when he was there Lida made sure that our paths didn't cross. He looked up at me and whispered, "Do you see what you caused? Didn't I tell you not to say anything. Lida is *crazy*."

I came back late after school the next day and found my disassembled bed and desk, leaned against the wall outside in the hallway with my bags of clothes. I didn't bother ringing the bell or knocking. My time was up.

I took the subway to my friend, Saide's, home. I got as far as her front door before stopping. She lived with her parents. I couldn't tell them the story. I couldn't admit what happened. I turned back and went to Lister Meile, the art district.

I walked outside into the balmy summer air and sat down on a bench in the park. I laid down and cried. And then I slept on my school bag. I woke up the next morning and returned to Lida's apartment. *Leine Lotsen* came a few hours later and helped move my things into my new residence. I was free from my sister's hold.

The next day I called my parents to let them know my new address and phone number.

"Hi Baba, it's me, Poopak. Can you hear?" I called.

"Yes, Poopak joon. You want to speak to your mother?" my Baba always wanted me and Mom to talk first.

"No. Yes. I want to tell you both something. Good news. I am moving out. On my own. To a new place."

"I'm very proud of you, azizam. When are you moving?" he asked.

"I moved already," I told him.

"We will call Lida to thank her for her hospitality."

"No! You don't have to call Lida. Everything is fine. I will tell her thank you."

I gave him all the information necessary and spoke to my Mom and Maryam before hanging up.

My biggest fear was that Lida would expose my shame. I would not let my father know what had

become of me. I could not let my family down. I would not be known as one of *those* Iranian girls: without family, without a place to belong to other than the streets.