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Hopeful

Written by Omid Djalili

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HOPEFUL

OMID DJALILI

headline

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1

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CHAPTER ONE

The Bearcat

'For myself I am an optimist – it does not seem to be much use to be anything else.'

Winston Churchill

Bearcat Comedy Club in Twickenham, 9 March 1996

It sounds like it should possess an edgy glamour, but in reality, the Bearcat is a scout hut in Whitton. I was one of two 'open spots' performing that night; the other was an extremely good-looking, long-haired, half-Indian bloke. I'd done the Edinburgh Festival the summer before and, fuelled by an alarming off-the-Richter-scale supply of self-belief, I wrote to all the comedy clubs in London listed in *Time Out*:

Hello, my name is Omid. You might have heard of me as the 'Short Fat Kebab-Shop Owner's Son', having just stormed the Edinburgh Festival ('a stand-up caught between cultural icons like Ayatollah Khomeini and Dickie Davies' – the Independent*). I'm writing now to say I would be willing to come to your comedy club establishment to perform comedy. I can offer a*

1 hour, 45 min or a 25-min set. Finance is negotiable. Get back to me ASAP.

Several weeks later, nothing. Then a lone phone call from a bloke called Grahame:

'Hello, is that Kebab?'

'Yes.'

'Got your letter. Come down and do five. If you're good you can come back and do a paid ten. If you're not, try again next year.'

I arrived at a dark and smoky function room connected to the Turk's Head pub, and was greeted by Grahame, a tall man with an impressive moustache, who ushered me towards a 'back-stage area' with no door that provided the audience with candid scenes of performers preparing to go on stage. Already weird. There I was welcomed by James, another tall man who ran the club with Grahame. They both had day jobs as school teachers. James even did his introductions holding a black folder, rather like a headmaster at a rather more interesting than usual school assembly.

On this auspicious occasion, James introduced me with a sense of wry mystery: 'And now, something from Iran.' Remarkably, my five minutes went down well. I had a few crowd-pleasing gags which I felt a little ashamed about, but my shame lessened having followed the half-Indian bloke, whose disastrous five minutes included repeating the line 'Trust me, I'm a doctor', his signature catchphrase, to general apathy and bemusement. His set ended in a flame of heckles and chants of 'Off! Off! Off!' After the gig I learned that he had been doing comedy for three years and insisted positively that this gig had 'been quite good, actually'. I was surprised to find out that he also worked as a promoter and even more surprised when he promptly offered me £50 to come to Wimbledon and do his

comedy night. This was on top of getting booked for a further ten-minute slot at the Bearcat. The ball was well and truly rolling.

The next week I turned up at the venue in Wimbledon (now the Polka Children's Theatre). I'd been worrying excessively about how to begin my act, having been listening to bootleg tapes of Lenny Bruce. I had somehow convinced myself that I had to replace funny with 'important issues' and social commentary. I had practised in front of the mirror (a technique well honed in fringe theatre) – speaking first in a droll manner then shouting ideas cultivated to challenge preconceptions and make the audience think as well as laugh. I had my heart set on a strong current-affairs opening with a statement about Mad Cow Disease, which had featured heavily in the news that day. I was armed and ready.

As I waited anxiously backstage I observed the act before me, a comic performing 'alternative ventriloquism'; i.e. purposefully low level and appalling. The synch of the man's speech with his puppet was all wrong, like a badly dubbed Chinese kung fu movie, and it was getting big laughs. He even had a finale that involved drinking beer and trying to talk at the same time. Clearly unable to achieve this proficiently, his puppet opened its mouth and all the audience could hear were noises of the comedian garbling into his pint glass. Mind-bogglingly raucous laughter ensued. I knew I had to be on top of my game to follow that.

I'd already decided that when I was introduced I would come bounding ironically on to the stage like a Shakespearean actor. Unfortunately the introduction I received was less than inspiring – 'Please will you welcome Omar Darjeeling!' (it took a full year before anyone got my name right on the comedy circuit) – nevertheless I pranced onto the stage regardless, hoping to fill the space with the most expansive presence I could muster.

Unaware of the location of the recent beer spillage, I headed nimbly straight into a puddle, slipped and fell hard. For a moment it seemed that my body was flying horizontally mid-air. The audience hooted with delight. As I picked myself up and clambered to the microphone, still trying to figure out what had happened, I realised that the microphone was firmly attached to its stand and refused to budge. As I struggled to pull it out, the audience started to titter again. A slow but steady comedy instinct pulsed within me, and told me to keep up the physical struggling, as this seemed to be getting laughs. At one point it must have looked like I was wrestling with the microphone stand, as the mic stubbornly resisted my attempts to remove it from its base. When it finally popped out (unexpectedly), it banged into my head violently and with such force that a three-inch cut appeared across my brow. I shouted 'Ow!' in genuine pain. By this time the audience were clapping.

Trying to soldier on from this series of unfortunate events, I started speaking but realised that I was barely audible. I'd pulled the mic so hard that the cord had also disconnected. My rather formal opening pleasantries were met with shouts of: 'The lead's come out, you twat!' (one heckle amongst other obscenities). As I looked down, I took a step forward to pick up the cord but didn't register how close I was to the edge of the stage. The white tape they use to define the edge nowadays was not compulsory then – and I fell head-first off the platform. I remember looking up at the ceiling from the floor and noticing the pretty wooden panels under the roof. In a brief snatched moment of relaxation I marvelled at how the reflected beams from the theatre lights gave the place an almost Gothic aesthetic. I even wondered if Dracula's castle in Transylvania looked a bit like that?

Presumably I was still in a daze from the fall, but I slowly came to, and was helped back up by punters who were telling

me: ‘Brilliant, mate. You can’t stop now, keep going.’ I tried to pull myself up swiftly, but realised the stage was rather too high for me to do anything with elegance, let alone athleticism. That ship had sailed. I was left with no choice other than to heave my left leg up and, stomach first, ‘walrus’ back into the spotlight. Sadly, as I lifted my leg, I stretched a little too ambitiously and my black trousers ripped on cue, suddenly revealing a patch of bright, white underwear. Again the audience laughed and clapped their appreciation. As I shuffled chest-first on to the stage, my grey shirt soaked up all the remaining spilled beer.

I slowly rose and gathered myself before my audience. I was sweaty, concussed, wet-shirted and bleeding heavily from a large verticle cut on my forehead, but still determined to complete my five-minute set. Catching my breath I waited for the noise to die down and simply said, in all sincerity, as no one could have predicted this particular sequence of disasters:

‘Sorry . . . can I start again?’

CHAPTER TWO

Beginnings

'Don't be satisfied with stories, how things have gone with others. Unfold your own myth.'

Rumi, 13th century Persian poet

I was born one sunny afternoon at St Mary Abbots Hospital off the Marloes Road in Kensington at 3.52 p.m. on Thursday 30 September 1965, the youngest child of Ahmad and Parvaneh Djalili. My parents had come from Tehran to London in 1958, the year my brother Javid was born. My sister Roxana followed in 1961 after which I, according to my mother, 'popped out with unusual ease'. It seems they finally got it right third time round. Actually, my parents never said this, but I always thought they should have done.

Before leaving Iran my father was a photographer, manager and chief salesman of a photographic shop called 'Photo Cinemayi'. Not many people possessed cameras in Iran in the 1950s so the only way to preserve memories from special events was to invite the most important guest – the person who owned the camera. It was also considered the height of fashion to dress up in your best clothes and visit Photo Cinemayi for group family tableaux.

Not all his commissions were quite so congenial. He also

covered the odd public hanging. He once told me how he even 'admired' the courage of one Turkish criminal who shouted at the jeering onlookers: 'You lot can all kiss my behind!', making the crowd surge towards him in anger. The man's final words were: 'One by one, if you don't mind.'

Interestingly, my father first laid eyes on my mother at the wedding of his good friend Ata Samii. Ata was marrying my mother's older sister Baraz, and my father was invited as both close friend and photographer. Although my mother Parvaneh was only fifteen at the time, my father became instantly smitten – and began a long and patient wait during the ten years it took until she agreed to marry him. In fact many of the photos from Ata and Baraz's wedding that day are shots of my mother, some in soft focus, unashamedly showing his obvious fixation.

Parvaneh was beautiful, extrovert and vivacious, no doubt appealing to my father's more reticent temperament. She came from Shemiran, a wealthy suburb to the north of Tehran, where the air was cleaner and the houses grander with large gardens and grounds. My mother attended the Noorbakhsh high school for girls in Tehran, a progressive institution where the girls, reminiscent of Communist China, would do morning exercises in unison before first lesson. The school specialised in churning out an impressive array of female scientists. My mother, however, chose to pursue domestic science, with a particular emphasis on dressmaking skills.

After school she became a confident and creative dressmaker, with the capacity to recreate her favourite 1940s and '50s styles just from observing them closely in her favourite British and American movies. Her love of dressmaking continued after she moved to London and for a while she assisted the famous Iranian singer Googoosh who stayed with us sometimes, and sought fashion tips from my mother. Apparently my mother also gave

her advice on how to manage quick costume changes during live shows. I remember them laughing hysterically together in a practice dry run as Googoosh struggled, trapped within vast folds of sequined material because a button from her dress had caught in one of her complicated hair ornaments. Not being able to see where she was going, she keeled over and crashed into the tea table. I remember feeling in awe of their hilarity.

My parents eventually married in 1957 and in 1958 they decided to leave Iran and move to London for a short while. My mother, being eight years younger than my father, wanted travel and adventure. She joked that 'take me to London' was her pre-requisite to accepting my father's proposal. As an aspiring dress designer, she was keen to experience the culture and excitement of Europe and the opportunities afforded in the West. My father was only too happy to oblige.

When they arrived in London, my father became a 'local liaison officer' at the Imperial Iranian Embassy. Much of his work involved helping fellow Iranians who had come over for medical assistance. In addition, he continued his role as photographer, taking copious professional photos at Embassy functions and parties, which would appear in the Iranian newspaper, *Kayhan*.

Although my parents were excited to be in London, they always assumed they would return home to Iran at some point. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 put an abrupt halt to that plan. But they showed a great degree of foresight and tenacity in building up a sideline business to support themselves after the Iranian Embassy changed hands. A business that would shape my entire life.

My parents started taking in lodgers almost as soon as they arrived in London. This part of their work began gradually. It grew out of a Persian custom – when you went overseas you would stay with 'friends of friends', and pay a little something

to your host for costs and expenses. This slowly turned into the main family income. During this period, my mother embraced a new role as capable tour guide and gained great expertise in taking sprawling and talkative groups of Iranians around the London sights. As well as standard photo opportunities by famous landmarks (once nearly getting arrested for trying to remove a Queen's Guard's hat in Whitehall just to get a reaction, having heard they are trained never to react to anything), my mother's 'tours' also included visits to the Lyceum Ballroom in the Strand, the Hammersmith Palais and the Empire Leicester Square. She also introduced bewildered Iranians to her favourite shows, *Oh! Calcutta!*, *Hair* and the mildly outrageous *The Romans in Britain*. Whereas the nudity in these shows outraged London's West End, most of the Iranian guests took it in their stride, assuming it was a theatrical represention of a factual documentary.

I've often wondered whether, if she were born into a different culture or era, my mother might have been a fashion designer or even a rather excellent comedienne. She certainly 'loved a joke', as they say, and I often heard her on the phone to Iran laughing hysterically at some new gag that was doing the rounds (like the way they do on social media these days) and then rushing to tell my dad. She was a well-known heckler at Iranian functions, her interjections always getting a laugh or a clap – her most popular, in response to long unwieldy talks by overly vebose Iranian speakers, being '*de begoo digheh!*' (get on with it!).

When I was three it was decided that I should attend the local nursery school. Unfortunately my nursery career ended on the first day when I threw up and was promptly dispatched home. This incident provided an unfortunate metaphor that could also be applied to my later relationship with formal education. However, in my defence, on this particular occasion I had

become increasingly terrified because the language I heard, understood and spoke at home did not correspond to the language I was hearing for the first time. In fact, I felt out of synch with my environment in every conceivable way. They played, I watched. They lay down contentedly for a nap, I remained rigidly awake on a crumb-infested and milk-stained pink corduroy bean-bag. Why my father had insisted I take this pink corduroy bean-bag with me to the nursery is still a mystery but at least it gave me somewhere to sit awake and stare at the other children as they slept.

Adrenaline was coursing through my veins and at one point I presumed I'd been kidnapped. This anxiety drove me to the refuge of the toilet whereupon I vomited with a great violence. Before I knew it, I was perched on my favourite window seat back home, minding my own business, playing with the occasional toy car, but mostly staring blankly at the street below. If only they'd left me alone in the first place, everyone would have been spared the hassle. I vowed to be master of my own destiny thereafter.

Luckily, when I turned four, I found a playmate called Sarah. She lived in the flat directly above us and had short dark hair, rosy cheeks and red patterned dresses that made her look like a Russian Matryoshka doll. My friendship with Sarah spanned almost a year, and her home became my unofficial kindergarten.

Her flat was considerably larger and tidier than mine. It was 1969 and the design was 'open plan' – light, minimalist and airy with modern décor, which gave it a futuristic science-fiction movie vibe. Though completely opposite to what I was used to, I felt comfortable and grew attached to the place. I don't remember much about my interactions with Sarah beyond a blurry recollection of us quietly exchanging coloured bricks back and forth. However I did enjoy the high-quality healthy

snacks provided by her mother, and particularly remember homemade popcorn as a rare delicacy. I also appreciated the light jazz music buzzing in the background. What you'd call 'vibey'.

Being so used to my own company I was unusually relaxed playing with Sarah and don't remember any conflict. Once, out of the blue, she told me I was her best friend. I wasn't sure what 'best friend' actually meant because Sarah was, to date, my only friend. If anything this declaration alarmed me as I hadn't considered the existence of Sarah having any other friends either.

After my first few visits to Sarah's flat, rather than asking to be taken there, I habitually began to make my own way upstairs, even packing a few cars as my personal contribution to our play session. Leaving the shadowy world of adults to rage on without me, I would climb one flight of stairs, and knock on Sarah's door three times. On seeing me she would calmly fetch the bricks and off we went, happily occupied for the next couple of hours. It was a good arrangement. After a while Sarah's mother produced some plastic farm animals and a round yellow wheel that made animal sounds when a cord was pulled. We honed our burgeoning cognitive and linguistic skills by providing voices for pigs, sheep and chickens. The animals usually conversed in polite American accents, as we were heavily influenced by Sarah's experience of *Sesame Street* on a recent US holiday. Sadly Sarah never visited me downstairs. My mother was grateful that I was occupied but – perhaps due to so much responsibility with our guests – didn't feel confident enough to return the compliment. Possibly Sarah's mother also preferred our friendship to take place under her supervision. It was a given that my home was too destabilising for a British four-year-old.

One day I ran up the stairs and knocked as usual, but was confused to find a strange older lady instead of Sarah's mother.

'I'm sorry, little chap, Sarah doesn't live here any more. She's gone away.'

I felt a sharp, sad feeling in my throat and a lurching sensation in my stomach. For a brief, deluded moment I chose to assume 'away' meant an actual place. I asked when she was coming back.

'She's not coming back. They've moved.'

Some important lessons were learned that day:

1) No one tells me anything.
2) Girls could not be trusted.
3) Life is unpredictable and full of unbearable shocks.
4) A pink corduroy bean-bag is no substitute for a best friend.
5) I'm going to have abandonment issues when I'm older.