The Saffron Kitchen

Yasmin Crowther

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Extract

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In north-east Iran, on the plains of Khorasan, there is a village called Mazareh. It is a honeycomb of brown mud walls, where the foothills meet the plains, far from the nearest city of Mashhad, with its golden domes and minarets. It is home to forty families or more, whose generations have farmed the lands and tended the flocks of the once powerful Mazar family, who gave the village its name.

But Mazareh has a meaning of its own – little miracle – and it has had its own share of stars springing from the earth at dusk. It is a land of superstition although the people are devout. If you go there now, you will find a new prayer house of red brick being built to replace the slowly crumbling shrine on the village edge. If you look further, behind the old shrine on a summer day, you may find wild flowers, ragged poppies, laid at the foot of a stone traced yellow with lichen.

Look more closely, and you will see it is not one stone but two, body and torso, a stone woman who has stood there beyond remembering. You might pass by and never know she was there, but in the dark night, the wind breathes through holes in her body and she sighs across the land. She watches the passage of time. She is there now as the earth turns. Its currents lap through her. Rough or gentle, the blasts and blows of the seasons, the centuries, make her sing, although she has no mouth, no tongue, no voice of her own.

This is her story, one she might tell, should you care to listen.

1

London

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear;
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.

W. H. AUDEN

Strange not to know that you're alive or even that you're about to die. That's what it must have been like for my unborn baby. I'd been kicked in the guts by my young cousin, as I hauled him back from trying to jump over the bridge's railings into the cold green water rushing out to sea. My mother's scream rang in my ears as she ran towards us and the world froze: the churn of the Thames at high tide, the rumble of going-home school traffic and the tremble of the bridge. In that moment, my baby started to die.

And then the world unfroze. The traffic rolled by as if nothing had happened, and my cousin, Saeed, and I clung together on the pavement. When my mother finally reached us, she hauled Saeed to his feet, shook him hard

and shouted in Farsi so that I half expected him to make another run for the hungry river. But it had claimed its life for the day. Saeed looked at his feet. My mother shook her open palms at him and the sky, and asked what she or his dead mother had done that he should treat his life so lightly. Only when she stopped for breath did she turn to see the spreading bloodstain on my pale-blue skirt.

'Oh, Sara.' She knelt on the wet pavement. 'Saeed, find her phone.' She pushed my rucksack towards him and out, on to the bridge, fell the rest of my life: my school books for marking, sixth-form essays on Othello and Desdemona, an apple, a bottle of folic acid tablets, cherry lip salve, my diary, a small photo album and, beneath it all, my phone. One of them dialled 999 and I felt Saeed wrap his anorak around me, his thin brown arms goose-bumped in the cold and bruised from the bullying. I rested my head on my mother's knee between the convulsions of my body and cried for the lost life I had never known; for Julian, my husband, somewhere oblivious of it all; and for myself.

'What am I doing here?' my mother had asked in tears earlier that summer as she tidied her immaculate kitchen, her head shaking as she again wiped down the surfaces, rearranged the fruit bowl and refused to sit down.

Her younger sister, my Aunt Mara, was dead and my mother had not seen her for over a year. When I thought of Mara, I mainly remembered her laugh, how it had bubbled and rippled from her. Everything about her had been generous. Even when she was in a wheelchair with cropped hair and swollen with drugs, she was beautiful. And they had not had the chance for a final goodbye. More or less five decades and two continents, stretching

from Paris to Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Bucharest, Istanbul, Baku, Mosul, Kirkūk and Tabrīz, lay between my mother's life in London and her sister's death in Tehran.

It did not help that Mara's husband had already remarried. My mother had cried and shouted down the phone at the betrayal, full of her own guilt. Mara's two oldest children were already grown up, but the youngest, Saeed, was just twelve. He was tall but slight, with the dark skin of his father, a solemn, angular face and large green eyes that rarely blinked beneath their thick lashes. He arrived on my parents' doorstep early that autumn and moved into my old bedroom, squeezing his stuff into the gaps my mother made, between the old clothes, books, toys and photos that I had left or stored there over the fifteen years since I had moved out.

The following weekend, I had driven over to my parents' from my home in Hammersmith. It was a Sunday morning and I'd woken early, the window rattling in its casement with a dry wind that had blown up from the Sahara and Arabia before that, leaving sand on the window ledges and car bonnets, and bending the stiff old London trees in the night. I'd woken with Julian curled round me, his hand on my growing belly, and the warm air billowing through the window.

'Come with me for lunch, to meet Saeed.' I rolled towards him.

'Next time.' He stroked my back. 'I've got a busy few weeks coming up. You go and do your Iranian thing and I'll get everything straight here.'

'All right, but promise you'll come and say hello soon.'

'I promise.' He kissed my neck. 'I'll miss your mother's cooking.'

My parents' home was on Richmond Hill, large and set

back from the road, far away from the rest of grimy London. The pine trees at the gate always welcomed me first, with their lemon green scent and the memory of childhood summers, scrambling up to the top branches, often away from my parents' arguing, to sit in the peace and dust motes with blood on my shins. I walked along the tidy, tiled, black-and-white path to the front door which my father opened before I knocked.

We hugged. 'You look well.' He held me back from himself.

'How are things here?' I asked and he rolled his eyes.

'Saeed's upstairs, settling into his room. He seems well enough. Your mother's in the garden. She wanted some quiet. A bit overwhelmed, I think.'

'I'll go find her,' I said, and he disappeared back into his book-lined study.

Along the hall, the house was full of the smell of her cooking, the soft, starchy scent of basmati, saffron and roasting lamb. I went through the kitchen with steam on its windows and along the narrow blue corridor with its long cupboards full of henna, herbs, dried figs and limes from her last trip home. The air was cool above the terra-cotta floor, before the steps down to the back door and into the garden.

I could hear my old tape-player from behind the yew hedge and beyond the rose garden, the tinny sound of tombok drums and sitar. I passed the greenhouse, figs and jasmine growing up one side, overhanging the path, and found her on the bottom lawn, kneeling quietly, eyes concentrating on her hands, weeding and tidying. She was still beautiful at over sixty: high cheekbones and dark hair to her shoulders.

'*Salaam*, Maman.' I spoke quietly but she turned quickly,

startled, breaking into a smile as she saw me, eyes full of tears.

She wiped her face with the back of her hand, leaving a smudge of mud on her cheek. 'Hello.' She pushed herself up, a little stiff. 'I've been thinking of Mara; how I wish she was here. We spent so little time together.'

I hugged her, and she felt small and fragile. 'I remember you and Mara both dancing out here to this music a few summers ago.'

It had been a dance from their childhood, arms raised, sinuous, slow, small footsteps and hips shaken with mock sensuality, one almond-eyed sister to the other.

She smiled. 'I'm not sure what the neighbours made of it.'

We both looked out across the tidy clipped hedges.

Later, I went upstairs to fetch Saeed for lunch. Ten oak doors led off the large landing, lit from a stained-glass window that stretched the height of the stairwell to the west. I knocked gently before going in to introduce myself. He stood to shake my hand with a polite bow that made me smile. His courtesy was a contrast to the mischievous twelve-year-olds I taught back at school. 'That's lovely,' I said, looking over his shoulder at my old acrylic paints on the desk. He had painted a gazelle in full flight, amber and gold, with its front and back legs stretched out like a rocking horse. 'What gave you that idea?'

He told me about an old Persian carpet that had hung by his bed in Tehran. 'The gazelle used to be in the corner close to my pillow. When my mother was ill and I couldn't sleep, I'd trace it with my finger.' As he talked, he held up his hand and drew the gazelle's outline again in the air between us.

My mother joined us then from the garden and rested

her hand on Saeed's shoulder to look at the picture as well. 'Mara drew beautifully too,' she said. 'When I first came to England, I used to send Elvis Presley tapes to her in Iran, and she'd send me her drawings of home, the village and our family.' She closed her eyes in the yellow sunlight.

'Have you kept them?' Saeed asked, gazing up at her.

'In the loft somewhere. They made me sad. I missed them all so much. I'll show you them one day . . . soon. But come on, it's time to eat.'

'Why did you first come to England, Aunt Maryam?' Saeed asked as we walked down the stairs, a child's curiosity in his voice.

'Well,' she answered, keeping her eyes on each step, 'I'd finished my nurse's training in Tehran and I couldn't go back to Mashhad. It seemed like an adventure back then. My father was pleased to send me, I suppose.' Her hand slid down the oak banister, blue veins and white knuckles, faded cuts and scars from the garden.

Saeed followed behind her, turning to look at the Hansel and Gretel cottage in the stained-glass window as he passed.

In the dining room my parents talked about the school he would start in a few weeks' time and his eyes flickered from one to the other. 'Your English will improve,' my father said, slicing the leg of lamb. 'When Maryam first came here, she only knew a few lines of poetry, which was remarkable, but not much use.'

Our eyes crossed to her face, cheeks flushed as she served rice on to the plates.

'My mother said you had your own English tutor,' said Saeed.

Her hand hovered above the plate, grains of saffron rice falling on to the cream linen tablecloth. 'Yes, that's true.'

She frowned, distant for a moment, rolling the fallen grains beneath her fingers, so they broke and smudged the linen. 'It was a long time ago; another life.'

My father leaned forward in his chair. 'Are you quite all right, Maryam?'

'Yes.' She held the back of her hand to her forehead. 'Sorry, let me get a cloth and clear this up. It's all this talk of Mara, the past. You bring it all back, Saeed – the dead and gone.'

He bowed his head as she walked from the room, and I squeezed his hand.

By the day on the bridge, Saeed had been at school for a month, and been bullied from the start. I had received an anxious call from my mother to say that the police had found him looking lost in King's Mall shopping centre during school hours. They had taken him to Hammersmith police station until he could be safely collected. Her call came at lunchtime and, as I had no lessons that afternoon, I said I would meet them there in an hour.

I walked through Ravenscourt Park. It was a beautiful autumn day, with red maple leaves fallen on the path and a hint of wood smoke in the air. As I hurried along past mothers pushing their prams, I thought of the child growing inside me, and of Saeed, here among strangers. Beyond the park, I walked along streets of smart terraced houses, gentrified in soft pastels, canary yellow and apple green, with sports cars in the road and lush curtains at the windows. Late honeysuckle and foxgloves still flowered in the small front gardens.

I tried to remember being twelve, Saeed's age. Fatima had come from Iran to stay with us at about that time. She

had looked after my mother when she was growing up in Mashhad in north-east Iran. She would make me laugh, sitting on the garden wall with her skirt above her knees. She wore long powder-blue bloomers underneath, with hidden pockets full of safety pins and buttons, and a small prayer tablet etched with the mosque at Haram. That had been 1978, the year before the Revolution. In the early days, during that spring over twenty years ago, Fatima had treated me as a child. Maybe the foxgloves had reminded me of it. She had brought a small bag of grainy black poppy seeds with her on the plane, and while she sat on the wall, bloomers in the sunshine, I ran up and down the garden in my school pinafore and white socks, sowing the seeds where they fell.

'They're from Afghanistan,' Fatima had looked into my eyes while my mother translated, 'near to where your mother grew up. They will still be here after we're dead.' She had smiled and pinched my cheek.

By the summer they had grown into tall, ragged opium poppies, pink, red and purple petals fluttering above the roses, stocks and gladioli. My mother had shown me how to score the seedpods with a razor, sap oozing out to be scraped away and made into the resin her father smoked at the end of his life. 'Don't tell your father,' she whispered to me, and there in the middle of our herb and vegetable garden, I touched something strange and dangerous, a world where flowers became poison and smoke.

Fatima always wore a headscarf in those days, which would slip back over her badly dyed purple-black hair as the day passed, and I took to wearing one too, knotted like a gypsy's at the back of my head. She would pull me on to her lap and tell me I looked just like my mother when she was small, and how she had always been my grandfather's

favourite and that was why he had chosen her to come to England.

'Do you miss your dad?' I asked my mother once.

'No. He's always with me, in my head.'

I don't recall much, if any, talk of her mother.

Then, with the summer and the poppies, the bleeding started. One morning I woke up and there was a warm dampness on my nightie. I sat up in bed, put my hand down there and brought it back sticky and dark, not like the bright-red blood when I cut my knee, but smelling strong: of inside me, I guessed. After that, once Fatima had found out, everything changed. I would run in the garden with my skinny legs in shorts, jumping through the water sprinkler, and she would bite the side of her hand and tut-tut, looking away.

'She's used to girls covering their bodies,' my mother explained. 'I used to bind my breasts down with a bandage and look at you, wet through.'

She had seemed angry somehow, impatient with me. Almost overnight, I became painfully self-conscious of myself, my body, its protuberances, shape, flow and juices: all bad, all spoiling, all beyond my control. That had been me at twelve.

The houses grew scruffier as I turned on to Shepherd's Bush Road and the traffic grew louder, car windows rolled down and hip hop bouncing into the street. I passed the Thai supermarket; the little old lady at the till by the door looked up and recognised me. She smiled and I waved. This was my patch – past the off licence, delicatessen and newsagent's. Brook Green stretched out on the left, the parched plane trees dropping their skin-coloured leaves where a group of tramps and drunks always gathered on two benches facing each other. You could smell them from

a few metres away. The same lone woman was usually in their midst. She was worn but ageless, thin in tight jeans, with white flaking skin and thick Afro hair. I crossed the street if I ever saw her walking towards me, asking for money. I guess it was her patch, too.

Then, at last, the police station came into view on the right, its blue lantern left above the door from another time. Beyond it was the fire station, opposite the library and before the PoNaNa nightclub, where girls in stockings and school uniforms hung out on Friday nights with hairy-kneed young men dressed like schoolboys, tongues hanging out like wolves. God knows what Fatima would have made of it all. I wasn't sure what I made of it myself. I half admitted I hoped my baby would be a son. Life for a boy somehow seemed less messy; there was less to go wrong than with a daughter.

Up the steps and inside the police station, smelling of linoleum, I saw my mother and Saeed, sitting side by side on a bench in the hallway. Both looked straight ahead, not talking. I put on a big smile and walked up to them. 'Hello, mischief.' I ruffled Saeed's hair and he pulled away, eyes full of angry tears that I hadn't seen before. 'All right, Maman?' I asked.

'The shame of it.' She shook her head as if she had dirt in her mouth. 'Why have you brought me here, Saeed? What would your mother say?' Her hands rubbed over each other, and there was a fleck of spit on her chin.

'Come on, lighten up.' I knelt beside Saeed. 'Don't worry, she's just a bit upset. She doesn't like places like this. It's not you.' I reached out and rubbed her arm. 'Let's get out of here. How about going to the river and seeing if we can find some tea?'

We walked in silence towards the squall of the

Broadway, awash with exhaust fumes, sirens and the distant shudder of the flyover heading towards Richmond and Heathrow. Saeed walked slightly apart from us. His anorak hung off his shoulder and the laces from one of his shoes dragged on the ground. He shrunk into his collar, and his new, short haircut left him looking cold and diminished. My mother was detached, with a weary resignation in each step. Her mouth was pinched and plum lipstick bled into her wrinkles.

We reached the riverside and turned right, passed the red-brick mansion block and boat clubs. It looked barren, abandoned by the weekend crowd of rowers and boozers. The traffic rumbled over the bridge, glorious khaki green and gold in the late afternoon, shadows and light playing off the water. A tall timber mast stuck up from the river bed, about ten metres into the flow, with an owl carved into it, like a totem pole where seagulls circled. It looked out over the tides, downriver to Putney, Battersea, Westminster, Greenwich and away. I pointed it out to Saeed, and he smiled with sad eyes.

We arrived at some trestle tables outside a pub. The door was ajar but it was lifeless within. 'You grab a seat,' I told them, hunting for chocolate biscuits in my rucksack, a weapon of last resort with my junior classes. 'I'll see if we can get coffees.'

Inside, I persuaded a New Zealander, looking lost and cold in his surf garb, to organise some filter coffee. Waiting, I looked over my shoulder through the large windows and watched my mother staring upriver, Saeed reading the side of the biscuit packet. Then she focused on him, her mouth moving, as I relaxed and rubbed the taut skin across my belly. Eventually she reached over and took Saeed's chin in her hand. I smiled, waiting for her to stroke the side of his

face: poor boy, all would be well. Instead, she drew back her hand and slapped him so hard his head jerked to the side. I felt as if I had been hit myself and hurried outside, stumbling hard against the door. Saeed was backing away from the table, his hand holding his cheek. He flinched as I put my arms around him. I could feel him shaking.

'What are you doing?' I demanded of my mother, her thick-veined hands trembling on the table, her cheeks spotted pink. 'He's bullied at school and then he comes home to this. You're supposed to look after him, protect him.'

'And make him weak?' she replied. 'You don't understand, Sara.'

'No, I don't.'

'When I was a child, if I was weak, I was punished. It made me strong. When I humiliated my father, he humiliated me. It made me strong. Look at Saeed. He's weak at school and you tell me to pity him. That won't make him the son Mara wanted, the grandson my father deserved, the nephew I want.' Her voice caught in her throat.

'I can't listen to this. Saeed, why didn't you go to school?'

He sat, half turned away, and spoke quietly, slowly: 'This morning I went to the bus stop, and got on the bus at the back. I was tired as I don't sleep well here. It was warm and I fell asleep. When I woke up, the bus was in Hammersmith. I tried to find your house, Sara, to wait, but I got lost. A police lady in the shopping mall helped me.'

My mother shook her head. Saeed's face was wet with tears. He leaned forward and rested his head in his hands. Our coffees were brought out and I sat watching them both. I couldn't quite believe what had happened. 'Come on, drink up,' I said. 'I'll drive you two home.'

Saeed stared at me, his eyes flooded and simmering. 'I don't want to go home with her.' He wouldn't look at my mother.

'You didn't mean it, did you? You're really sorry, aren't you, Maman?'

I needed to hear her apology as much as Saeed did, but she looked over my shoulder, towards the moored houseboats, their walkways and nodding geraniums.

'It's not the first time,' he whispered.

'What isn't?' I asked, frowning.

'That she's hit me.'

I turned to my mother.

'He's too weak.' She blew on her coffee, her hands trembling.

Saeed stood up and walked away from the table. I tried to hold on to his sleeve, but it slipped through my fingers. 'Come back,' I said softly. He walked slowly at first, but when he was out of easy reach, he started to run towards the bridge. 'What have you done, Maman?' I asked, and made to follow him, walking briskly and then trying to jog as Saeed ran up the steps.

I put my hand under my belly, breaking into a sweat. My mother pushed herself up from the table and turned to follow us, as I panted up the steps with my eyes half closed. Saeed had made it to the middle of the bridge and stood there as I drew closer. He looked at me like a frightened animal, and then glanced down at my mother, still on the riverside. The railing was low and he suddenly leaned forward to swing one leg over it. At that, I heard a shrill cry of distress from my mother, a deathly scream, as she saw what was happening, and I felt a surge of adrenalin shoot through me. I flung myself towards my little cousin, balanced a few metres away, and grabbed him as he wavered. With all my

weight, I pulled him back on top of me, his foot kicking into my gut as we crashed down on to the pavement. I felt a cramp like life being wrung out of me, and clung to Saeed on the damp ground.

A little while later, I heard sirens straining to clear a way through the clot of traffic around the Broadway. I kept my eyes closed and disappeared inside myself, away from the violent shivering that ground my teeth and bent me double.

When I woke up, pale-blue light flickered across my eyelids and I lay still with my eyes closed. I could be dead. I listened to the distant traffic, insistent horns and screeching brakes mingling with echoes from the depths of the hospital: its trolleys, swinging doors, births and deaths. I must be quite high up, I thought, above the menagerie. Nearer, I heard the soft squeak of shoes trying to tread quietly, and whispers. I could smell lilies. I didn't want to open my eyes, but I was still breathing: I felt the rise and fall of my ribcage. Beyond the heavy scent of pollen and disinfectant, I could smell something acrid: my own skin and the dried scent of panic. I ran my tongue over my parched lips and licked the salty tears pooled at their edges before I felt a hand on my forehead and a kiss on my mouth.

'My beautiful wife.'

His words twisted through me and I opened my eyes, lifting my arms to hold him. With a rush, everything seemed to hurt: my knees and hip where I had fallen, my nails where they had torn against Saeed's uniform, the back of my head where it had cracked against the pavement, and my ruptured, hollow inside. Julian rested me back on the pillow and laid his finger across my lips. His skin was grey, his blue eyes shrunken and red.

'I don't want to see my mum,' I whispered, my throat tight.

'You don't have to.' He stroked my face.

'Take me home?' I asked.

'In the morning, if the doctor says so.'

'Do they know what it was?' My hands were cold and clammy, holding his.

'A boy.' Julian's voice cracked as he rested his head beside mine.

We stared out of the window into the orange dusk.

That night I dreamed of my mother. I was standing at the French windows to the rear of my parents' house. They opened on to a small sandstone patio with three steps down to my mother's rose garden, a neat maze of flower beds cut into the mossy grass. The roses were just past full bloom: fat pink, red, peach and yellow petals, browning and curled at the edges. There was a breeze and it blew the petals from the flowers, twisting and tumbling in the air and across the lawn where my mother walked slowly towards me. She kept stooping to gather the fallen petals in her arms, but they blew away almost as quickly as she could bend to reach them.

'Maman,' I cried out, 'come quickly.'

But her gaze was distracted by the flurry; rose petals blowing and spiralling around her. Then, as if from a children's story, from behind the yew hedge at the bottom of the garden emerged a soot-black and amber-striped tiger, its soft paws heavy on the dewy English lawn, moving straight towards my mother as she heaved herself too slowly up the steps.

'Don't turn round!' I cried, as the tiger drew itself back

on taut, sprung haunches. 'Come,' I called to her with my arms open, and the tiger bounded into them.

I woke up, the pillow sodden beneath my neck and hair matted against my face. Soaked with sweat, I wiped the chill wetness from my skin with the back of my hand and looked into the grey light of an early dawn. I wanted to go home. As life woke up around me, I closed my eyes again. I could scarcely bear to see it: a new day beginning, indifferent, inexorable. I felt old. I left my breakfast of dried toast and orange juice on the tray. The smell of it brought bile into my mouth. My dad arrived as I lay there, trying to send my mind somewhere else, to a parallel universe of happy endings.

'Hello, darling,' he said as he bent to kiss me, looking like he hadn't slept. 'I brought some proper coffee and a croissant, your favourite.'

'I'm really not hungry, Dad. But thanks.'

'Nonsense, try a mouthful for your old man,' and he broke off a small piece and held it to my mouth.

I let the pastry go soft in my spit and closed my eyes before swallowing.

'And another.'

I opened my mouth again.

We sat like that silently for half an hour, and he fed me like he would a sick bird, crumb by crumb. At the end we smiled at each other. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, pale-brown cloth dog, its fur worn through and one ear stitched back with green thread.

'Ted.' I laughed and winced at the same time.

'He's a bit the worse for wear, but he's seen you through some tough times.'

I held the small toy up to my face and breathed it in, the

smell of powder and the drawer in my old room full of discarded make-up and perfume. 'Thanks, Dad.'

'Your mum's devastated, you know.'

'I guess so,' I replied. 'Did she tell you what happened? Hitting Saeed?'

'Yes, enough.' His face collapsed at the recollection. 'She's decided to go back to Iran for a while. She feels so guilty. I don't think she can bring herself to see you.'

'I don't think I can face seeing her right now. I wouldn't know where to begin.' I heard him sigh. 'Are you all right, Dad, with her going away?'

'Yes, it gives everyone some time to sort things out. But I hate to see you all so upset. I keep thinking I should have been able to do something.'

'It wasn't your fault.'

'I don't know. Maybe I should have seen it coming. She's not as young as she was, and Saeed's taken his toll, waking up in the middle of the night in tears. I think he made her homesick and exhausted all at once.'

'How is Saeed now?'

He shook his head. 'It's just about all he needed.'

'I don't know why it happened.' I felt my own tears coming again.

He took my hand. 'She's a complicated woman, Maryam. Sometimes she's a mystery to herself, let alone to me.' He had shared these words before, other times when she had seemed to crack around the edges, a stream of Farsi shouted from the landing before the door to her turquoise room was slammed shut, emerging full of regret hours later.

I closed my eyes as he sat on the side of the bed. It started to rain and I listened to the soft fall against the window. The doctor came and drew round the curtains, as

my dad waited for Julian in reception. 'You're about fine to go home,' he said as he prodded and probed. 'Have a check-up with your own doctor in a week.'

'What about my baby?' I asked.

'Not much to see.' He studied his hands. 'Early days. You could do a blessing. That sometimes helps.'

I looked at him: greying temples and long, thin fingers. 'Thanks.' I rested back against the pillow.

Julian arrived a short while afterwards.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said. 'I just needed to hand off some work.'

He had brought fresh clothes and drew the screen round again. I sat up as he untied the blue paper gown and gently helped me to stand and step into my jogging pants and jersey. It felt strange to be on my feet again, as if it had been an age and not just a day since I had fallen.

I leaned against him as we walked slowly to the car. I longed to get home, and hugged my dad goodbye beneath the heavy grey sky.

Sitting in the kitchen a day or so later, my fingers traced the knots and swirls of the tabletop. Julian was upstairs. Everything seemed shabby in the dull light. The air was dirty and motionless and I wished it would rain. Creswell, our black Labrador, nosed at the back door to get into the garden. I pushed myself up and walked over the cold tiled floor to lift the latch. There was a green blanket on a hook above our boots and walking shoes, and I wrapped it round my shoulders, kicking on some flip-flops. Outside was the long, narrow garden with a high beech hedge on one side and a tall, dark wood fence on the other, overhung with honeysuckle in the summer and ivy now. There were

lavender and rosemary bushes beside the door, and I bent to rub my hands through them, smelling their sweet, sharp fragrance.

I walked along the mossy sandstone paving to my bench at the bottom of the garden beside an acer that dropped red sycamore seeds in spring but was bare now. The bench was part of a maple trunk with a seat hewn into it. It was dry enough and I perched on the edge before sliding back and tucking my feet under the blanket. Our neighbours' terraced houses stretched away on either side. I felt flooded with fatigue.

The telephone rang inside and then stopped. Julian called my name. I sat still and closed my eyes, hearing the squeak of the back door, then his voice. 'What are you doing out here? Aren't you cold?' he asked. His hair was tousled, glasses perched on the end of his nose as he watched me, near and far away at the same time. 'Come on, I'll make some tea. Your dad's on the phone.'

I uncurled my legs and rubbed my calves. 'Be along in a second.'

Inside the kettle was already rattling on the hob as I went through into the sitting room and sat on the edge of the sofa.

'Hi, Dad, how are you?' I said.

'That's what I should be asking you.'

'Oh, I don't know. Glad to be home.'

'Yes.' I imagined him standing by the phone in his study, surrounded by all his legal magazines and papers. 'I'm taking your mum to the airport tomorrow morning. She's been into town today and got her tickets from Iran Air.'

'How is she?'

'Quiet. She wants to be on her own most of the time.

I'm staying out of her way. She knows where I am. You know she loves you very much, Sara.'

'Yes.' I thought of her room at the corner of the house, its turquoise walls and the smell of her perfume, lily of the valley. 'How long's she going for?'

'She's got an open-ended ticket, so it could be anything between a fortnight and a month or so. You know what she's like. I can't pin her down.'

'Yes, I know.' Growing up, life had been punctuated by her occasional trips back to Iran. I'd make my own way to school as dust gathered in the corners, house plants wilting and sheets unchanged. My father would do his cheerful best until she returned, laden with presents, gold bangles and pistachios.

'I suppose I should be used to it by now.' He laughed, tired. 'It will be good for Saeed and me to get to know each other better. Go for some walks, you know. And I could do with a pair of young hands in the garden.'

'I'll come and see you both in a few days,' I said. It was quiet on the other end of the line. 'Tell Mum goodbye for me.'

'Yes, darling, take care.'

I put down the phone and looked at the black-and-white photograph from my parents' wedding on the sideboard. It was in the mid-sixties outside Chelsea register office, everything shiny and black with rain. In the background my mother was wearing a short white wedding dress, thin gauzy material floating round her thighs. She was looking away from the camera, to the side of the frame, her hair in a short bob and her veil flying high above her, caught in the wind like a sail. In the foreground my father was running towards the camera, his eyes wide and cheeky like a schoolboy's behind horn-rimmed glasses. He was in a dark Beatles

suit, holding out a black umbrella as if he thought his new wife was right beside him, sheltering from the rain. He had no idea she was far behind, in a world of her own. I touched the glass covering the picture before turning back to the kitchen and the smell of toast.

Julian and I sat opposite each other across the table. I didn't want to meet his eyes. He rested his hand alongside mine, cupping it against the wood. My other hand warmed on the mug of tea. Over his shoulder, the wall was a dull mushroom sort of colour. I had liked it at first, the self-effacing softness of it in a kitchen which part of my mind still remembered as always flooded with soft green light, full of the garden's reflections through the window. It felt more like a mouldy greenhouse at that moment.

'That wall could do with a lick of paint,' I said.

Julian twisted his head round to look at it, and I watched the tendons stick out on the side of his neck. He faced me again with an overindulgent smile.

'Yeah. Why not?'

I saw how he watched me with a new, anxious, careful love, as if I might crack and splinter at the wrong word. I'd seen my father look at my mother in the same way.

'You know how you were supposed to go to New York next week?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said, 'I'm trying to reorganise it.'

'That's not what I mean.' I squeezed his hand. 'I think you should go. It's lovely you're here, but some time on my own might be a good thing.' He frowned, trying to peer into me and I smiled gently. 'It will be all right.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I've got so much to think about, all that's happened.'

'Your mother?' he asked. 'She never hit you, did she, Sara?'

'No,' I looked through the window, 'not as far as I remember. She would get cross sometimes, out of nowhere. Once, I must have been about eight, I was playing in front of her dressing table on my own, and put on one of her scarves, knotted beneath my chin. I had her bright-red lipstick smudged all over my face.' Julian smiled. 'She was so furious when she saw me. She said the scarf was her mother's and I should know better. She scrubbed my face until it was sore, but the worst thing was that she got out the kitchen scissors and just lopped off my pony-tail, so my hair was really short. She said I wouldn't play with make-up if I looked like a boy. You should have heard me cry.'

Julian shook his head.

'It only happened once and she felt really bad afterwards. It's funny now.'

'But still, damage was done.' He reached for my hand as we sat together in the late afternoon, waiting for life to begin again.

My father phoned the next day to say she had gone. He'd spent the afternoon with Saeed, looking for windfalls in the garden. They were going to bake an apple pie.

'Sounds good,' I said. 'I'll come and try some, after Ju's left.'

'He said you thought some quiet time would be good. You'll be all right?'

'Yes, fine. What about you?' I heard him sigh. 'What's up?'

'Oh, I don't know, Sara,' he answered. 'I went into your

mother's room when I got back from the airport and sat in the middle of all her stuff. She'd left behind her address book, half English, half Farsi. The only thing of mine was that glass paperweight I'd given her, with a red rose in the middle. I sat there and hated myself for giving it to her – a dull, heavy thing with a dead flower inside.'

I frowned. 'It will be all right, Dad.'

'Yes, sorry, darling, I know.'

Later, I sat on the bed and watched Julian pack. He was quiet and methodical, opening and closing the doors and cupboards we had rubbed against for the five years of our married life together.

'We should go away when I'm back,' he said.

'Yes, by the sea. I'd like that.' My legs stretched before me and he gently rubbed one of the high arches, a habit of tenderness, before bending to kiss my forehead.

The next morning he was gone.

I sat at the foot of the stairs in the empty house, Creswell staring up at me. 'How about some tea?' I began, and went to fill the kettle, staring out of the window above the sink. I could hear London's rumble beyond the walls and gardens, the clatter of the Tube as it came overground on its way to Chiswick, the roar of planes on their way down the Thames to Heathrow, the distant drill of road-works and car doors slamming. I listened to the sigh and creak of bricks and floorboards as a blackbird outside whistled urgently, beautifully through it all, and the water came to a boil.

There was a card on the window sill from work: *Get Well Soon*. It had arrived with a bouquet of flowers that I'd put in Julian's study, not wanting to see them, already wilting in their vase. Next to the card, beside a basil plant and a clay pot of pens, was a small glass jar with a black lid. It

was dusty and left a fine powder on my fingers as I picked it up. *Zaferan* was written on the side in my mother's hand, black ink on a white label. It was half full of orange, red and ochre stamens, complete or crumbled: saffron from crocuses. I twisted the lid and lifted the jar to my nose, and it was as if I breathed in an essence of my childhood. There was something about the smell: earthy, sharp, sweet and delicate. I thought of my mother: she would already be in Mashhad. It was a city I knew mainly from photographs and stories she had told me, and also from summer holiday visits when I was very young. I put some saffron in my mug and poured on hot water, watching it slowly turn amber.

I had a memory from when I was a small child of going to Dover with her, just the two of us. We had found our way down to the shore, the cliffs behind us, white and yellow against the blue spring sky. She had sat on a blanket and brought out a small red book. She had only ever shown it to me on a few other occasions.

'This book brought me here, Sara, from far away.' She had put her arms around me with tears on her face, not just due to the salty air. 'Let's think of Maman's home,' she had kissed my cheek, 'and wish it good thoughts.'

'What thoughts?' I'd asked, and she'd smiled then.

'Ah, love, let us be true to one another.'

I'd frowned at her and sing-songed, 'True to one and other,' thin and shrill into the air, lost over the white-tipped dark sea.

'Where are you?' I said aloud in the quiet kitchen. I closed my eyes.