EVERYTHING SAD IS UNTRUE

(a true story)

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When I was a kid in Isfahan, I would tell my mother that someday, I would build her a castle at the top of Mount Sofeh. I could see it from my window. A castle in the sky. I didn't know that life would make a liar out of me. I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't forget. I just never managed it. I wrote you a book instead. I know it isn't even close.





It seems like only yesterday that I believed
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.

—Billy Collins (approximately), "On Turning Ten"

The people of the world say that Khosrou is an
idol worshipper
Maybe so, maybe so
But he does not need the world
And he does not need the people

—Amir Khosrou

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for, that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the impotent and infinitely small Euclidean mind of man, that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, of all the blood they've shed; that it will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

ALL PERSIANS ARE LIARS and lying is a sin.

That's what the kids in Mrs. Miller's class think, but I'm the only Persian they've ever met, so I don't know where they got that idea.

My mom says it's true, but only because everyone has sinned and needs God to save them. My dad says it isn't. Persians aren't liars. They're poets, which is worse.

Poets don't even know when they're lying. They're just trying to remember their dreams. They're trying to remember six thousand years of history and all the versions of all the stories ever told.

In one version, maybe I'm not the refugee kid in the back of Mrs. Miller's class. I'm a prince in disguise.

If you catch me, I will say what they say in the *1,001 Nights*. "Let me go, and I will tell you a tale passing strange."

That's how they all begin.

With a promise. If you listen, I'll tell you a story. We can know and be known to each other, and then we're not enemies anymore.

I'm not making this up. This is a rule that even genies follow.

In the *1,001 Nights*, Scheherazade—the rememberer of all the world's dreams—told stories every night to the king, so he would spare her life.

But in here, it's just me, counting my own memories.

And you, reader, whoever you are. You're the king.

I'm not sucking up, by the way. The king was evil and made a bloody massacre of a thousand lives before he got to Scheherazade.

It's a responsibility to be the king.

You've got my whole life in your hands.

And I'm just warning you that if I'm going to be honest, I have to begin the story with my Baba Haji, even if the blood might shock you.

But don't worry, dear reader and Mrs. Miller.

Of all the tales of marvel that I could tell you, none surpass in wonder and coolness the one I am about to tell.

COUNTING THE MEMORIES.

Baba Haji kills the bull.

My very first memory is blood, slopping from the throat of a terrified bull, and my grandfather—red-handed—reaching for my face. I would have been three at this time.

Maybe I have memories before that. I don't know.

If I did, they'd be flashes of tile patterns, or something.

I can make it up, if you want.

But really, it was the blood. And the bull braying. And the gurgling sound.

People ask, "Really? Really was it blood?"

They ask because they don't believe me.

They don't believe because I'm some poor refugee kid who smells like pickles and garlic, and has lice, and I'm probably making up stories to feel important.

I don't know what the American grown-ups have for memories, but they can't be as beautiful as mine.

So they laugh. They don't touch me. But they roll their eyes. "Okay," they say.

"It is," I say. "It's one of two memories I have of my Baba Haji." I promise. I haven't been careless with it. My heart clenches it like a fist.

Like gripping a ball bearing as hard as you can. The fingers dig into the palm and you don't even know if it's still in there. The knuckles are white and you're afraid it fell out and you didn't even notice. You're just clenching nothing until your nails cut into your palm and you bleed.

The memory is small. Barely a few pictures. His face is one still image.

IT BEGINS IN A big gold car. It isn't real gold, just painted the color. It was so big the seats were two couches on wheels.

The car drives on a dirt road through a desert in the middle of Iran. Specifically, on the road to Ardestan.

That doesn't mean anything to you, probably, if you even bothered to pronounce it. I could have said, "on the road to *skip-this-word-you're-a-dumdum-stan,*" and it'd be the same. It was a desert in a faraway land.

You want a map?

Here's a map.



When I say the words, people think it may as well be Mars. Or Middle Earth. I could say we drove a chariot pulled by camels and they'd believe me.

But it was a Chevrolet. And we were normal back then.

I wore sneakers with Velcro and had a dad.

He had a bushy red mustache and could make weird faces to be funny. He would blow out his cheeks and furrow his eyebrows like a super serious chipmunk.

He drove. My mom sat beside him and handed us pieces of pistachio cardamom cake. The road went up and down like an ocean.

On either side was sand that could suck down half the car before we could even get out. Some places, the sand blew over so you couldn't see any road at all.

My dad drove so fast it was like a boat going up a wave and crashing down the other side. My sister and I would shriek as our butts lifted off the seat. My mom would say, "Akh. Masoud, slow down. You'll kill your children."

But this was the road my dad knew by heart, because he was born in Ardestan, and he was going home. He drove hungry for his mom's stew and yogurt. His dad was my Baba Haji.

This trip happened every weekend for a while. So this part isn't my first memory. I'm just telling you how it happened *every* time.

The drive would have happened before I saw Baba Haji slaughter the bull, but I'm not certain. The cake could have been rose and honey. My mom could have said, "Akh, Masoud, not this again." His mom could have made kebab and yogurt.

But those aren't differences that make a difference.

The next image is parking outside of the stone walls of my grandfather's courtyard. I see myself, because this part is not my own memory. It was described to me by my mom. So imagine from up by her head, looking down at me. I'm three years old.

I wore corduroys. I carried my stuffed sheep, Mr. Sheep Sheep, in one hand and a stick in the other. I wanted to be a shepherd. My cheeks were chubby, and people pinched them constantly, so I scowled a lot. I was the serious chipmunk.

"Akh. So cute. The cutest boy you have ever seen," my mom would say.

I am now in school in Oklahoma and no one agrees with this.

I am told it would be dusk in the village of Ardestan by the time we arrived. The sun shined red behind a dusty mountain. The house was surrounded by a wall, ten feet high. It was six hundred years old and made of stone.

The garden was inside the wall. It was lined with mosaic tiles. The trees were almond, peach, and fig. At the center

was an inlay fountain that cooled you with its whisper. In the corner was the well.

But we hadn't seen any of this that first time. I just know it because it's a place in my mind. I could go there now if I wanted. When teachers brought us to the sod house in Oklahoma and told us it was ninety-eight years old, I asked why they'd made a museum out of it.

The teacher looked at me like I was simple.

"Because we preserve and cherish historical things," she said.

"But no one lives in it?"

"No."

"So every ninety-eight years, people move out of their houses and turn them into museums?"

She looked away at this point, probably because her answer would have been, "What're you, simple?"

"Okay, class, hold a buddy's hand and keep moving."

The first time we went to Ardestan, the time I'm telling you about, we got out of the car outside of the walls, and heard the sound of men shouting and hooves clonking on the stone.

My dad said, "Stay here," and ran around to the entrance, to see if it was one of those demons who hide behind the hedgerows.

We didn't stay there, of course. He wasn't the kind of father you listened to.

I remember approaching the gate. Louder and louder the men shouted. Curses. "Yalla! Yalla!"

I turned the corner.

In the courtyard, by the well, was a bull.

Four grown men from the village struggled to hold it down.

A giant beast. Its eye was black and bigger than any marble in my collection. In it was a swirl of panic.

Sweating.

Shaking.

Insane with fear.

A knife lay on the stone where one of the men had dropped it.

The bull saw me.

Its eye looked at me.

I remember this, because it was the only time I have ever been begged for anything. The bull let out a sound I can only say was like opening your mouth and trying to push all the food out of your stomach.

One of the men slipped off the wet hindquarters and fell.

My dad ran over to help.

But before he reached them, my grandfather emerged from the house. He wore sandals and his muslin pants were rolled up to his knees. I knew it was my Baba Haji even though I think this was the first time I had seen him.

He stepped off the porch and walked toward the confusion. He shook his head at the mess they had made and sucked his teeth in disgust.

In a single motion he leaned over, picked up the knife, and pushed aside the man grappling with the bull's horns. I heard him say, "Here," like, "Here, let me do it."

Then, with one hand, he grabbed the bull's horn and pulled it sideways. I could no longer see the bull's eye, only its exposed neck. With the other hand, my grandfather stabbed the knife into the bull, below its ear, then pulled down and around to the other ear.

The whole neck opened.

Blood poured onto my grandfather's bare feet.

The bull's legs buckled.

I heard a gargle.

The men stepped back, relieved and embarrassed.

It collapsed.

My mother must have been the one who screamed.

My vision went black. She had covered my eyes. I heard her say, "Akh, Masoud!" as if my dad should have known.

Underneath her hand was the color red.

My next memory is back at the car, outside the walls. Mom very angry. Dad kinda laughing cause whatever, farm life, you know? He thinks she's overreacting.

She won't go back until they clean up the blood.

He explains the men were running late. The bull should have been slaughtered hours ago. My grandfather's only grandson (me) had come. What else did she expect?

It occurs to me at this point that the feast was for me.

The bull must have known I was the right person to beg.

I could have saved it.

My three-year-old brain doesn't know what that even means.

When I tell this whole story, I don't tell anyone about that part. I was just a little kid back then. Still. They'll think I

want their pity. In America they distrust unhappy people. But I don't want pity. I just wonder if they've had that feeling too. The one where you realize it's your fault that something beautiful is dead. And you know you weren't worth the trouble.

When I opened my eyes, my Baba Haji was looking at me. This is the only memory I have of his face. It was craggy, his beard white and red. He had a knit skullcap and a permanent squint from working in the sun.

He reached for my cheeks.

He smiled at me.

His hands were still red with blood.

Behind him the animal was bleeding on the stone. The blood pooled and flowed toward the drain. A red river.

Oklahoma also has a Red River.

It is not red.

In some places, it's not even a river.

THAT WAS MY FIRST MEMORY of my grandfather. My second memory is not a true one. It is the kind you invent in your head because you need to.

On the phone once, with my dad—I was in Oklahoma, he was in Iran where he stayed—he said, "Your Baba Haji has a picture of you on his mantel. Every day, he weeps and kisses it."

I imagine him doing this.

I don't know what the mantel of his home looks like, so I make one in my mind out of rough stone. I don't know the

picture he had of me, so I make it the one from Will Rogers Elementary School in Edmond, Oklahoma.

He holds the frame in his shaking hand.

He cries for me. "Akh!"

My dad tells me Baba Haji's only wish is to see me before he dies.

I say, "Okay."

It is my job to give this to him. If he dies before he sees me, he will be the bull. It will be my fault. I make up this whole memory of Baba Haji, the vision of him by his mantel, so that I can hold it every day.

That is all I know about him for sure.

I don't want to speak about it anymore.

Of my grandmother Maman Massey—Baba Haji's wife—I have three memories.

The first is of her feeding me sweet dates dipped in thick yogurt she made.

The second is her sitting on a wooden stool weaving a Persian rug in the dark on a giant loom hidden deep in the cellar of their house.

The third is her voice on the phone from across the world, when I realized I would never see her again.

Here in Oklahoma, the kids like to fight me because they know I won't tell anyone.