Opening Extract from...

A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea

Written by Dina Nayeri

Published by Allen & Unwin

DINA NAYERI

A *Teaspoon* OF EARTH AND SEA

ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in the United States in 2013 by Riverhead Books, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Allen & Unwin

Allen & Unwin
c/o Atlantic Books
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London WC1N 3JZ
Phone: 020 7269 1610
Fax: 020 7430 0916
Email: UK@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.atlantic-books.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 74331 449 4

Book design by Amanda Dewey

Printed in Great Britain

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Philip and for Baba Hajji,
whom I once longed to see together in the same room

Part 1

Unseen Strand

You and I have memories
Longer than the road that stretches out ahead.

—*The Beatles*

Prologue

CHESHMEH VILLAGE (GILAN PROVINCE), IRAN
SUMMER 1981

This is the sum of all that Saba Hafezi remembers from the day her mother and twin sister flew away forever, maybe to America, maybe to somewhere even farther out of reach. If you asked her to recall it, she would cobble all the pieces together as muddled memories within memories, two balmy Gilan days torn out of sequence, floating somewhere in her eleventh summer, and glued back together like this:

"Where is Mahtab?" Saba asks again, and fidgets in the backseat of the car. Her father drives, while in the passenger seat her mother searches her purse for passports and plane tickets and all the papers needed to get out of Iran. Saba is dizzy. Her head hasn't stopped hurting since that night at the beach, but she doesn't remember much. She knows just this one thing: that her twin sister, Mahtab, is not here. Where is she? Why isn't she in the car when they are about to fly away and never come back?

"Do you have the birth certificates?" her father asks. His voice is sharp and quick and it makes Saba feel short of breath. *What is*

happening? She has never been away from Mahtab for this long—for eleven years the Hafezi twins have been one entity. No Saba without Mahtab. But now days have passed—or is it weeks? Saba has been sick in bed and she can't remember. She hasn't been allowed to speak to her sister, and now the family is in a car headed to the airport without Mahtab. *What is happening?*

"When you get to California," her father says to her mother, "go straight to Behrooz's house. Then call me. I'll send money."

"Where is Mahtab?" Saba asks again. "Why is Mahtab not here?"

"She'll meet us there," says her mother. "Khanom Basir will drive her."

"Why?" Saba asks. She presses *stop* on her Walkman. This is all so confusing.

"Saba! Stop it!" her mother snaps, and turns back to her father. Is she wearing a green scarf? There is a spot of black over this part of the memory, but Saba remembers a green scarf. Her mother goes on. "What about security? What do I say to the *pasdar*s?"

The mention of the moral police frightens Saba. For the past two years it has been a crime to be a converted Christian in Iran—or an ex-Muslim of any kind—as the Hafezis are. And it is terrifying to be a criminal in the world of brutal *pasdar*s in stark uniforms, and mullahs in turbans and robes.

"There will be *pasdar*s there?" she asks, her voice quivering.

"Hush," says her mother. "Go back to your music. We can't take it with us."

Saba sings an American tune that she and Mahtab learned from an illegally imported music tape, and goes over English word lists in her mind. She will be brave. She will perfect her English and not be afraid. *Abalone. Abattoir. Abbreviate.*

Her father wipes his brow. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

"We've been through this, Ehsan!" her mother snaps. "I won't have her raised in this place . . . wasting her days with village kids, stuck

under a scarf memorizing Arabic and waiting to be arrested. No, thank you."

"I know it's important"—her father's voice is pleading—"but do we have to make a show of it? Is it so bad if we just *say* . . . I mean . . . it can be hidden easily."

"If you're a coward," her mother whispers. She begins to cry. "What about what happened . . . ?" she says. "They will arrest me." Saba wonders what she means.

"What is *abalone*?" She tries to distract her mother, who doesn't answer. The fighting frightens Saba, but there are more important things to worry about now. She taps her father on the shoulder. "Why is Khanom Basir bringing Mahtab? There's room in this car." It is odd that Reza's mother would drive at all. But maybe this means that Reza will come too, and Saba loves him almost as much as she loves Mahtab. In fact, if anyone asks, she is happy to claim that she will marry Reza one day.

"In a few years you'll be glad for today, Saba jan," her mother says, deciding to answer some unspoken question. "I know the neighbors call me a bad mother, risking your safety for nothing. But it's not nothing! It's more than any of them give to their children."

Soon they are in the busy Tehran airport. Her father walks ahead, taking quick, angry steps. "Look at this mess you've made of our family," he snaps. "My daughters—" He stops, clears his throat, and changes tack. Yes, this is the best way, the safest way. Yes, yes. He continues walking with the luggage. Saba feels her mother's hand squeezing hers.

Saba hasn't been to Tehran in months. When the Islamic Republic began making changes, her family moved permanently to their big house in the countryside—in Cheshmeh, a peaceful rice-farming village, where there are no protests, no angry mobs spilling into the streets, and people trust the generous Hafezis because of the family's deep local roots. Though some villages, with their terrifying mullah

justice, are more dangerous for a Christian family than big cities, no one has bothered them in Cheshmeh, because the conservative, hardworking farmers and fishermen of the North don't attract close attention from the *pasdar*s, and because Saba's father is smart enough to lie, to oil the bread of curious neighbors by opening the house to mullahs and townspeople. Saba doesn't understand what they find so fascinating about her family. Reza alone is more interesting than all the Hafezis combined, and he has lived in Cheshmeh for all of his eleven years. He's taller than the other kids, with big round eyes, a village accent, and warm skin that she has touched twice. When they marry and move into a castle in California with Mahtab and her yellow-haired American husband, she will touch Reza's face every day. He has olive skin like boys from old Iranian movies, and he loves the Beatles.

At the airport, Saba sees Mahtab in the distance. "There she is!" she yells, and she pulls away from her father and runs toward her sister. "Mahtab, we're here!"

Now this is the juncture where the memory grows so foggy that it is just a dreamy patchwork of flashes. It is an accepted fact that at some point in this day her mother disappears. But Saba doesn't remember when in the confusion of security lines and baggage checks and *pasdar* interrogations this happens. She recalls only that a few minutes later, she sees her twin sister across the room—like the missing reflection in the mirror from a frightening old storybook—holding the hand of an elegant woman in a blue manteau, a heavy outer robe exactly like the one her mother was wearing. Saba waves. Mahtab waves back and turns away as if nothing were happening.

When Saba rushes toward them, her father grabs her. Yells. *Stop it! Stop it!* What is he hiding? Is he upset that Saba has made this discovery? "Stop, Saba. You're just tired and confused," he says. Lately, many people have tried to cover up things by calling her confused.

Memory plays such cruel tricks on the mind—like a movie with

its tape pulled out and rolled back in, so that it shows nothing but a few garbled images. This next part feels somehow out of order. At some later point, her mother comes back—even though a minute ago she was holding Mahtab's hand. She takes Saba's face between two fingers and promises wonderful days in America. "Please just be quiet now," she says.

Then a *pasdar* in a security line asks her parents a string of questions. *Where are you going? Why? For how long? Is the whole family traveling? Where do you live?*

"My wife and daughter are going alone," Agha Hafezi says—a shocking lie. "For a short time, on vacation to see relatives. I'll stay here to wait for them."

"Mahtab's going too!" Saba blurts out. Is the *pasdar* wearing a brown hat? He can't be. *Pasdar*s don't wear the kind with a full brim. But in the memory the same brown hat always materializes.

"Who is Mahtab?" the *pasdar* barks, which is scary no matter how old you are.

Her mother lets out an uncomfortable laugh and says the most awful thing. "That is the name of her doll." Now Saba understands. Only *one* daughter is going. Do they plan to take Mahtab instead? Is that why they've kept her away all this time?

When she starts to cry, her mother leans down. "Saba jan, do you remember what I told you? About being a giant in the face of suffering? Would a giant cry in front of all these people?" Saba shakes her head. Then her mother cups her face again and says something heroic enough to redeem her. "You are Saba Hafezi, a lucky girl who reads English. Don't cry like a peasant, because you're no Match Girl."

Her mother hates that tale—a helpless street girl wasting matches to conjure up daydreams instead of building a fire to warm herself.

You are no Match Girl. This is Saba's last memory of that day. In a flash her mother disappears and there is a jumble of other images

Saba can't explain. She remembers someone's green scarf. A man with a brown hat. Her mother appearing in lines and at gates. Saba running away from her father, chasing Mahtab all the way to the window overlooking the airplanes. Each of these visions is covered by a layer of hazy uncertainty that she has learned to accept. Memory is a tricky thing. But one image is clear and certain, and no argument will convince her otherwise. And it is this: her mother in a blue manteau—after her father claimed to have lost her in the confusion of the security lines—boarding a plane to America, holding the hand of Mahtab, the lucky twin.

It's All in the Blood (Khanom Basir)

Saba may not remember clearly, but I do. And yes, yes, I will tell you in good time. You can't rush a storyteller. Women from the North know how to be patient, because we wade in soggy rice fields all day, and we're used to ignoring an itch. They talk about us all over Iran, you know . . . us *shomali*, northern women. They call us many good and bad things: fish-head eaters, easy women with too much desire, *dehati*. They notice our white skin and light eyes, the way we can dismiss their city fashions and still be the most beautiful. Everyone knows that we can do many things other women can't—change tires, carry heavy baskets through fast rains, transplant rice in flooded paddies, and pick through a leafy ocean of tea bushes all day long—we are the only ones who do real work. The Caspian air gives us strength. All that freshness—*green Shomal*, they say, *misty, rainy Shomal*. And yes, sometimes we know to move slowly; sometimes, like the sea, we are weighed down by unseen loads. We carry baskets of herbs on our heads, swaying under coriander, mint, fenugreek, and chive, and we do not rush. We wait for the harvest to saturate the air,

to fill our scattered homes with the hot, humid perfume of rice in summer, orange blossom in spring. The best things take time, like cooking a good stew, like pickling garlic or smoking fish. We are patient people, and we try to be kind and fair.

So when I say that I don't want Saba Hafezi to set hopeful eyes on my son Reza, it is not because I have a black heart. Even though Saba thinks I hate her, even though she gives all her unspent mother love to old Khanom Omidi, I've been watching out for that girl since she lost her mother. Still, just because you cook a girl dinner on Tuesdays doesn't mean you hand her your most precious son. Saba Hafezi will not do for my Reza, and it salts my stomach to think she holds on to this hope. Yes, Saba is a sweet enough girl. Yes, her father has money. God knows, that house has everything from chicken's milk to soul of man—that is to say, everything that exists and some things that don't; everything you can touch, and some things you can't. I know they are far above us. But I don't care about money or schoolbooks. I have a more useful kind of education than the women in that big house ever had, and I know that a bigger roof just means more snow.

I want my son to have a clearheaded wife, not someone who is lost in books and Tehrani ways and vague things that have nothing to do with the needs of today, here in one's own house. And what is all this foreign music she has given him? What other boy listens to this nonsense, closing his eyes and shaking his head as if he were possessed? God help me. The other boys barely know there is a place called America. . . . Look, I want Reza to have friends without jinns. And Saba has jinns. Poor girl. Her twin sister, Mahtab, is gone and her mother is gone and I don't mind saying that something troublesome is going on deep in that girl's soul. She makes a hundred knives and none have any handles—that is to say, she has learned how to lie a little too well, even for my taste. She makes wild claims about Mahtab. And why shouldn't she be troubled? Twins are like witches, the way

they read each other's thoughts from far away. In a hundred black years I wouldn't have predicted their separation or the trouble it would cause.

I remember the two of them in happier days, lying on the balcony under a mosquito net their father had put up so they could sleep outside on hot nights. They would whisper to each other, poking the net with their painted pink toes and rummaging in the pockets of their indecent short shorts for hidden, half-used tubes of their mother's lipstick. This was before the revolution, of course, so it must have been many months before the family moved to Cheshmeh all year round. It was their summer holiday from their fancy school in Tehran—a chance for the city girls to pretend to live a village life, play with village children, let worshipful village boys chase them while they were young and such things were allowed. On the balcony the girls would pick at bunches of honeysuckle that grew on the outer wall of the house, suck the flowers dry like bees, read their foreign books, and scheme. They wore their purple Tehrani sunglasses, let their long black hair flow loose over bare shoulders browned by the sun, and ate foreign chocolates that are now long gone. Then Mahtab would start some mischief, the little devil. Sometimes I let Reza join them under the mosquito net. It seemed like such a sweet life, looking out from the big Hafezi house onto the narrow winding dirt roads below and the tree-covered mountains beyond, and, in the skirt of it, all our many smaller roofs of clay tiles and rice stalks, like Saba's open books facedown and scattered through the field. To be fair, the view from our window was better because we could see the Hafezi house on its hilltop at night, its pretty white paint glowing, a dozen windows, high walls, and many lights lit up for friends. Not that there is much to see these days—now that nighttime pleasures happen behind thick music-muffling curtains.

Some years after the revolution, Saba and Mahtab were put under the headscarf and we could no longer use the small differences in

their haircuts or their favorite Western T-shirts to tell them apart in the streets—don't ask me why their shirts became illegal; I guess because of some foreign *chert-o-pert* written on the front. So after that, the girls would switch places and try to fool us. I think that's part of Saba's problem now—switching places. She spends too much time obsessing about Mahtab and dreaming up her life story, putting herself in Mahtab's place. Her mother used to say that all life is decided in the blood. All your abilities and tendencies and future footsteps. Saba thinks, if all of that is written in one's veins, and if twins are an exact blood match, then it follows that they should live matching lives, even if the shapes and images and sounds all around them are different—say, for argument's sake, if one was in Cheshmeh and the other was in America.

It breaks my heart. I listen to that wishful tone, lift her face, and see that dreamy expression, and the pit of my stomach burns with pity. Though she never says out loud, "I wish Mahtab was here," it's the same stew and the same bowl every day. You don't need to hear her say it, when you see well enough, her hand twitching for that missing person who used to stand to her left. Though I try to distract her and get her mind on practical things, she refuses to get off the devil's donkey, and would you want *your* son to spend his youth trying to fill such a gap?

The troubling part is that her father is so unskilled at understanding. I have never seen a man fail so repeatedly to find the way to his daughter's heart. He tries to show affection, always clumsily, and falters. So he sits at the hookah with his vague educated confusions, thinking, *Do I believe what my wife believed? Should I teach Saba to be safe or Christian?* He watches the unwashed children in Cheshmeh—the ones whose mothers tuck their colorful tunics and skirts between their legs, hike up their pants to the knee, and wade in *his* rice fields all day long—and wonders about their souls. Of course, I don't say anything to the man. No one does. Only four or five people know

that they are a family of Christ worshippers, or it would be dangerous for them in a small village. But he puts eggplant on our plates and watermelons under our arms, so, yes, much goes unsaid about his Saba-raising ways, his nighttime jinns, and his secret religion.

Now that the girls are separated by so much earth and sea, Saba is letting her Hafezi brain go to waste under a scratchy village play chador, a bright turquoise one lined with beads she got from Khanom Omidi. She covers her tiny eleven-year-old body in it to pretend she belongs here, wraps it tight around her chest and under her arms the way city women like her mother never would. She doesn't realize that every one of us wishes to be in her place. She wastes every opportunity. My son Reza tells me she makes up stories about Mahtab. She pretends her sister writes her letters. How can her sister write letters? I ask. Reza says the pages are in English, so I cannot know what they really say, but let me tell you, she gets a lot of story out of just three sheets of paper. I want to shake her out of her dream-world sometimes. Tell her we both know those pages aren't letters—probably just schoolwork. I know what she will say. She will mock me for having no education. "How do you know?" she will goad. "You don't read English."

That girl is too proud; she reads a few books and parades around like she cut off Rostam's horns. Well, I may not know English, but I am a storyteller and I know that pretending is no solution at all. Yes, it soothes the burns inside, but real-life jinns have to be faced and beaten down. We all know the truth about Mahtab, but she spins her stories and Reza and Ponneh Alborz let her go on and on because she needs her friends to listen—and because she's a natural storyteller. She learned that from me—how to weave a tale or a good lie, how to choose which parts to tell and which parts to leave out.

Saba thinks everyone is conspiring to hide the truth about Mahtab. But why would we? What reason would her father and the holy mullahs and her surrogate mothers have for lying at such a time?

No, it isn't right. I cannot give my son to a broken dreamer with scars in her heart. What a fate that would be! My younger son twisted up in a life of nightmares and what-ifs and other worlds. Please believe me. This is a likely enough outcome . . . because Saba Hafezi carries the damage of a hundred black years.