

My Mother, Behind the Glass

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I told my sister Ashraf I was going home to get my books. I lied to her. If I had told her that I wanted to take my mom's photograph from the album, she wouldn't have let me go. She would have made a face and said something mean to me. See, my mom is her father's wife. Since mom has been inside, she doesn't want to set eyes on her. She doesn't know how much she has changed. How could you expect her to know? You'd have to go and see her to believe it. When they arrested Mom, Ashraf came to our house. She grabbed my hand and took me to their house. She didn't say a word.

I said, "How about my mom?"

Her eyes narrowed, the way they did whenever she felt sorry for me. "You are a big girl now. You don't need your mom."

Then her husband came in, and Ashraf didn't say another word. I really hated her husband. The way he looked at you made you feel ashamed of yourself. . . . If it weren't for those little imps of sister Ashraf's, Majid and Mahin, I wouldn't have stayed there. Of course, I didn't have anywhere else to go. And my brother Reza had gone to Tehran. I say it was because of that woman. I don't know what she told Reza that made him so angry that if you stuck him with a knife he wouldn't bleed.

That day my brother was not speaking at all. But his face was as red as could be. His wife's neck was straight; it was disgusting the way she was looking at us. Mom was crouching in a corner and

watching Reza out of the corner of her eye. Sister Ashraf kept going over to brother Reza and begging him not to leave. But my brother was looking at her with his bloodshot eyes; finally he said, "Get out of my way."

To tell the truth, I was afraid of brother Reza, and in my heart I wanted him to leave us alone. I didn't like his wife at all. She always picked on Mom. Whenever I came back from school I would see them fighting over something. Brother Reza always took his wife's side. If his own mom were alive he wouldn't let his wife be so bold. When he left, my brother didn't even look at Mom. They took all their things and left. And then Ashraf left. Then I realized how bad things were. The house was different; it was sad.

Mom lifted her head and said, "To hell with them; let them go."

Then she stood up and tidied the house. She was trying to act normal. But she was unhappy. I knew it. I went to the yard. When I returned I saw Mom's eyes were red. Mom used to cry in hiding as if she was ashamed if others saw her tears. But I saw her tears. From behind that damn glass. Yes . . . there. . . . When I looked up I saw Mom's face was full of tears and full of wrinkles and lines under her eyes.

When Mom wanted to leave the house she would spend one hour, yes . . . a whole hour in front of the mirror and rub her face as if she were going to a wedding. Sometimes she put cucumber skin on her face and when I looked at her I laughed. When she was done with the skin she would get busy with her eyes and eyebrows. Mom's eyes are very big and they are always somewhat moist. Her eyelashes are long. When she put eyeliner on her eyes, she was very beautiful. Then she would take the tweezers and attack the hairs on her face. Then she would put a very red lipstick on her lips and look at herself in the mirror, smiling. And then she would change and put on a very nice perfume. I used to run to her then, and she would put a little perfume on my clothes, too. Then she would go out.

Since Dad had died, Mom was spending a lot of time by herself. She went to parties, one after another, as if she were making up for those days Dad didn't let her go anywhere. When Dad was alive, Mom was not allowed to go anywhere. I don't know why. But once, Dad had seen Mom talking and laughing with Yousef, the owner of the convenience store. I still remember what Dad did to Mom that day. He took his belt and kept hitting her. Mom was screaming.

You see, Dad was very old, and so when Mom cursed at him he would get angry and hit her more. Then Dad got sick and died. Oh, God, what a bad time that was. Mom was crying like the rest. But I knew she didn't really feel that bad. Well, she never liked Dad. She always said so herself. Mom used to curse her parents, who had made her life so miserable. But I knew that she didn't curse them from the bottom of her heart. I had seen her taking them many things from the house secretly; cooking oil, rice. . . . Every New Year she sent them money so that they could buy me gifts or send her presents. I had learned all of these things.

Once, Dad's first wife found out and made such a fuss that you wouldn't believe it. Then they cursed each other and pulled each other's hair; a big fight. Dad's wife and Mom fought a lot. Then Dad's wife got cancer and died. Mom thought things would change and Dad would stop picking on her and wouldn't beat her anymore. But Dad's behavior got even worse. He always wanted to know where Mom was going and with whom. Reza and Ashraf also ignored Mom after the death of Dad's wife. And then Dad would beat Mom for every little thing. Mom always said, "I will finally kill myself and be free from this damned life."

Once she really wanted to do something. That day she had been beaten really bad by Dad. She kept screaming and swearing she would kill herself. At night she brought two bottles of pills from the back room, and she was about to take them when I rolled around in my bed and whispered, "Mom!" as if I was talking to her in my sleep. Mom looked at me for a minute. Of course my eyes were closed, but I knew she was looking at me. Then, all of a sudden, she hugged me and began crying. Then I was in her arms, and my hair was wet from my tears. I wish Dad weren't so mean. I wish I could sleep in Mom's arms forever. I wish I had stayed small, like that night, so Mom wouldn't leave me alone at home and go out. . . . Oh, God, I wish she were home now and I hadn't come to Ashraf's house. I wish she would take me there with her. What would have happened?

Once, when she was going out, I said to her, "Mom, take me with you."

"You sit here and study. I'll be back soon."

She always said she would be back soon and she never came back soon. I followed her into the alley. I saw that she covered her face and rushed to the street and got into a cherry-red Peykan.¹ The

driver was a young man and had a red shirt on and was staring at Mom. I didn't like him at all. And then the Peykan took off. I came back alone. At night, when Mom came home, she had bought me a beautiful barrette.

I said, "I don't want it."

I was being stubborn. I didn't want to talk to her, but Mom was very happy. She took the barrette and put it in her own hair. She had recently dyed her hair blonde. It suited her well. She was younger and more beautiful. She stood in front of the mirror and laughed. As if someone else in the mirror were looking at her; maybe that same young guy. I had never seen Mom that happy. But I don't know why I didn't want to talk to her. Her laughter was kind of strange. You wouldn't like it. I'd say it was that guy's fault they arrested Mom.

I used to go to the back room of Ashraf's house and sit and cry. I missed Mom a lot. Once Ashraf came into the back room. I wiped away my tears but I think she understood.

"What is wrong?"

"Nothing."

Then she sat next to me. "Do you miss her?"

I didn't say anything and kept my head down. My tears ran down my face. Sister Ashraf stroked my hair. "You shouldn't miss her. If she had a little bit of affection for you, she wouldn't leave you at home while she is going out with strange men. She has ruined our reputation."

My tears were pouring down. I think sister Ashraf took pity on me. "All right, I'll take you to see her. Stop crying."

Then she took me there and said she would stay outside the door and wouldn't come in. If her husband found out he would skin her alive. Then she said, "I hope she has learned her lesson and won't do things like that anymore."

That day I went and sat behind the glass. Sister Ashraf was outside and didn't come in with me. I was afraid, very afraid. It was so crowded. My heart was racing. Then suddenly a voice came from the other side, and a woman came behind the glass. I say "a woman" because I didn't recognize her at first, but it was her, Mom. Oh, God, she had changed a lot. Her face was full of lines and wrinkles, and her eyes were sunken. She was really old. I felt so sorry for her. I got a lump in my throat and burst into tears and began crying, "Mom!"

Mom's face was covered with tears. She had a worn-out chador

on and was sitting behind that thick glass, like a strange woman, crying.

I told her, "Mom, do something so they will let you out. I don't want to go to Ashraf's house anymore."

Mom was just crying behind the glass.

NOTE

1. A brand name of a car made in Iran.