Above and Beyond Love

A Novel by

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Dedicated to

Mahmud Kianush

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Chapter One

That morning, when the letter from the hospital arrived and I read it, all the fear and dread in the world seemed to rush into my heart. Until that day, I had never been admitted to hospital. I had a strange fear of being there. I used to think that when people went into hospital, more often than not they never came out alive.

And that morning, the letter informed me that the following week I was to be "*admitted for further tests, and perhaps a bone biopsy as well."*

For how long? They hadn't said.

As I read the letter, I felt as though someone had handed me my death sentence. But when my husband read it, he shook his head with satisfaction and said:

"That's great. They need to admit you as soon as possible so they can find out what's causing the pain and begin the proper treatment."

I was both surprised and hurt by his calm and satisfied reaction, but I tried hard not to let even a trace of what was going through my mind show in my voice. Pretending to remain unaffected, I said:

"Yes, that's great! After two years of waiting, I'll finally know where I stand, and I'll no longer be a burden to you all!"

Haadi, my husband, realising the bitterness behind my words, looked at me kindly and said with empathy and concern:

"Firoozeh, I don't think you understood what I meant. I don't mean that I'm happy you're being admitted to hospital! God forbid. Don't you realise that throughout these two years you've been suffering from bone pain, you haven't been alone? The children and I have suffered with you too. How long can you go on taking all these different painkillers like sweets, when they don't even seem to help? Haven't you noticed how much weight you've lost over these past two months? It isn't right. That's why I said they should have admitted you sooner, so they could start treating you."

I looked at him, ashamed and apologetic, then went over to him. As I always did, I rested my head on his shoulder and, for a moment, found some peace, allowing myself to believe that life could go on.

But unfortunately, throughout that week I was filled with such anxiety and dread that even those brief moments of love and togetherness could not ease the distress in my heart or bring me peace.

So, to ensure that I did not upset my husband and children any more than necessary, I decided to hide my fear from them. But whenever I was alone during the day, I would picture, over and over again, the scene following my bone-biopsy operation, imagining my specialist telling me gently and cautiously:

“I’m sorry, the results show you have bone cancer. There is nothing more we can do for you. At most, you have another year to live. Be brave. Make the most of this year and try to be happy! And don’t worry about your pain; we won’t let you suffer. For the time being, we’ll control it with cortisone, and later with morphine.”

Then, thinking how unfair it was to dwell on such a cruel fate for myself and my loved ones, I would turn instead to another possibility and resign myself to becoming paralysed and spending the rest of my life in a wheelchair.

Whether I was asleep or awake, only my own grief-stricken heart, aching for itself, knew how that nightmarish week passed, until finally the morning of the appointed day arrived and, with my husband, son and daughter, I set off for the hospital.

I remember clearly that once they had allocated me a bed and I had been formally placed under the care of the ward sister, she told my husband and children that they could rest assured everything was in hand now, and that they could visit every day between two in the afternoon and seven in the evening. In truth, her guidance was simply a polite way of asking them to leave, and they had no choice but to say goodbye and go.

Once they had left, the spacious ward, with all its patients and the constant comings and goings of nurses, doctors and hospital staff, seemed to become smaller and smaller around me until it felt as suffocating as a solitary cell. Their departure felt like being separated from all that was free, cut off from the rhythm and flow of life.

Throughout that day, until evening, they repeatedly took my blood pressure and temperature, drew blood from my arm for various tests, and finally put together a medical file for me and attached it to the foot of my bed. At least three times, different doctors came; the curtains were drawn, and they examined and questioned me in turn. They wanted to know about my previous illnesses, this new condition, all the treatments I had undergone, the medicines I had taken, my name and particulars, my family, my parents, my grandparents and even my great-grandparents, and finally, which country I came from. And each time I told them where I came from, I felt my heart race with a sudden surge of anxiety.

In those days, the events in my homeland were among the leading stories in the world’s media, particularly here in England, where my family and I now live. On television, the people of my country were often shown with clenched fists, chanting revolutionary slogans, calling for the war[1] to continue and for revenge against the enemy. As a result, people abroad had come to form opinions about my nation that were often far from fair.

In those same media reports, the people of my country were sometimes described as savages and terrorists. With such widespread prejudice, it was hardly surprising that admitting I was Iranian caused me such anguish. Yet every time I was asked, despite the lump tightening in my throat, I would answer clearly and firmly:

“I am Iranian. My husband and I came to your country many years before the Revolution[2] so that our children could continue their education here, and we ended up staying. Even now, my greatest wish is for them to complete their studies as soon as possible so that we can return to our own country.”

They would listen carefully to what I said without offering any comment, making notes as I spoke.

That day, in the intervals between all the note-taking and repeated examinations, and while I waited for my husband and children to come to the hospital, I had the opportunity to take a closer look at the ward in which I had been admitted.

The only interesting thing that happened that afternoon was the arrival of a woman of about seventy or eighty, lively, cheerful and full of energy, whom everyone seemed to know. They called her Miss Betty, and she treated everyone with warmth and kindness.

Miss Betty, whose cheerful voice did not seem to belong to someone of her age, was busily asking the nurses how they were when a doctor, roughly her own age, came into the ward. He greeted her with warm familiarity and, had he not at that moment asked her to lie down on bed number two, directly opposite mine, so that he could take her blood pressure, I would never have believed that someone with such vitality could herself be one of the patients.

As he was taking her blood pressure, the doctor said in a joking tone:

“Miss Betty, if you had listened to the social worker’s advice and gone to live in the ‘palace’, we wouldn’t have had to remove one of your kidneys now. After all, my dear friend, we have to accept that neither I nor you are that young anymore.”

Miss Betty replied to the doctor with a smile:

“Dr Wright, believe me, I’m still not ready to go and live in the ‘palace’. What can I do? I’m just too cheeky! I do feel sorry for all of you here, though, having to put up with me every so often, carry out all those internal repairs and give me a bit of an overhaul before sending me on my way again. Then, before long, I’m back, and here we go all over again! But really, Doctor, don’t make too much of it. Anyone’s kidneys can pack up and stop working. That has nothing to do with age.”

While gently patting her shoulder, Dr Wright said:

“Miss Betty, I know. Don’t worry. You are an extraordinary woman. I’ve always admired you. If only all my patients, in fact everyone in the world, had your spirit and your outlook on life, then the world would certainly be a better place. So, for now, promise me you’ll take it easy for these next couple of days and don’t get up to any mischief until we see one another again the day after tomorrow in the operating theatre. All right? And also, I didn’t mean anything by my reference to the ‘palace’, so I hope I’m forgiven.”

After Miss Betty had promised to follow the hospital’s instructions to the letter, the doctor said goodbye and left.

I found this old woman’s behaviour very strange, and even stranger was the respect and casual warmth with which the doctor treated her. I could not understand what he had really meant by his joke about her going to the “palace”. I thought perhaps the word “palace” had some special or symbolic meaning between the two of them.

Then I told myself:

“For heaven’s sake, dwelling on these thoughts isn’t going to help my situation.”

To distract myself, I took out the book I had brought to the hospital from the little cupboard beside my bed and began to read. Although it was an interesting story by one of my favourite authors, it could not hold my attention for more than fifteen minutes. Realising that it was no use, I closed the book and reclined on the bed.

Just then, a rather stout black woman pushing a trolley laden with cups, various kinds of tea and coffee, and a large container of biscuits came into the ward. She addressed Miss Betty and me, apparently the only patients who were allowed to eat or drink at the time, and asked:

“Tea or coffee? With milk or without? One sugar or two?”

“Tea, please. Without milk and without sugar,” I replied.

She placed a cup of tea on my table, with four biscuits on a side plate, and then gave Miss Betty her coffee with milk and biscuits.

Then, carefully and almost without making a sound, she pushed her trolley towards another part of the ward.

Once she had gone, a nurse came in carrying a handful of green papers. Without saying a word, she placed a green sheet on the table beside each patient’s bed and left. She moved so mechanically and quickly that even Miss Betty did not have the opportunity to ask her any questions or enquire how she was.

Afraid that Miss Betty might catch my eye and try to start a conversation with me, I immediately began drinking my tea and eating my biscuits. At the same time, I picked up the green sheet and pretended to be reading it. But in truth, I could neither taste the tea and biscuits nor take in the several columns of writing on the sheet, even though my eyes remained fixed on them.

When I had finished my tea, I put the empty cup back on the table and stretched out again. Just then, I heard the familiar sound of footsteps approaching along our ward’s corridor. One pair was firm and purposeful, the other quick and lively. I felt they must belong to my husband and daughter.

I half-rose and looked towards the people coming and going in the corridor. Then I saw my husband, carrying a large bunch of red roses, walking along the corridor with my daughter.

I watched them coming towards me and, the moment they entered, it seemed as if they brought with them a ray of light, life and freedom into the oppressive darkness that had enveloped me. As they came closer, I saw my daughter’s face, her sweet smile making her look like a flower in bloom. She was holding a small bunch of wild violets, which she gave to me, saying:

“Hello, Maman. I brought these for you. Baba has brought you red roses too.”

I kissed them both warmly and said joyfully:

“Thank you both so much. But Soussan, my dear, where did you find these wild violets?”

She replied:

“In our own garden. I knew how much you love them.”

I said in great surprise:

“In our own garden?! Is it spring already?! How strange! I hadn’t even noticed. For the past two years, I have missed both spring and summer.”

While placing the flowers in the vase the nurse had given him, my husband said:

“It’s not your fault that you didn’t notice spring had arrived. The climate on this island isn’t like Iran, where the seasons arrive when they are supposed to. We don’t really have four distinct seasons here.”

Then he and my daughter brought their chairs closer to my bed, sat down, and we began talking about what they had been doing for me that day at the hospital.

I looked around and noticed that the visitors had arrived one by one and were now sitting on chairs beside the patients’ beds. Some were leaning over the beds, speaking softly to the patient they had come to visit, while others held their hands and sat looking at them in mournful silence.

Someone was sitting beside Miss Betty’s bed, while she was apparently busy arranging her belongings in the small cupboard beside her. From a bag, she took out a book, a pair of thick-lensed glasses, two framed photographs and an album, and placed them neatly on the cupboard. She arranged everything with such care that it seemed as though she were in her own bedroom.

Just then, my son came in carrying a box of chocolates, and once again, for a moment, a wave of happiness swept through my heart.

While we were all talking, my son leaned towards me and whispered:

“Maman, there’s an old lady in the bed opposite you who looks very kind. She has been looking at us the whole time as though she knows us. I think she wants to talk to us. Do you know her?”

I said quietly and quickly:

“No. All I know is that her name is Miss Betty and that they are going to remove one of her kidneys in two days’ time. Don’t take any notice of her, Soheil dear. If you start talking to anyone here, they will immediately want to know where you come from, and I’m really not in the mood for explaining. A little while ago, just before lunch, a nurse came to take my temperature. When she had finished, she stayed for a while and, just as you imagined Miss Betty might, began chatting away in a friendly manner. She talked about the weather and the patients, then asked whether I had a husband, how many children I had, where I lived and, finally, where I came from. The moment I told her I was Iranian, that warm smile vanished

from her face, as though I had said something deeply offensive. She suddenly became very serious and, without another word, abruptly went on her way. That's what they are like here."

My husband said:

"Firoozeh, my dearest, I don't think they are all like that. I have told you many times not to prejudge people. If, throughout history, we have suffered at the hands of anyone, it has been the British government itself, not the people."

I replied defensively:

"If that is so, then just answer me this. Was it not these same English people who, for two hundred years, took the lives and possessions of the Indians and became their Sahib and Memsahib, their masters?"

And then he said:

"No. Those who colonised them belonged to the ruling class, a class directly connected with the government. If you want to know what the lives of ordinary English people were like in those days, try to remember the stories of Charles Dickens."

And I, unable to find a convincing answer, said:

"You have always disagreed with my views. I am quite used to that by now."

But Haadi, with patience and grace, took my hands in his, then turned to the children and said:

"Do you know what my greatest wish is right now? Only that Maman should truly get well and come back home as soon as possible. For the moment, I want nothing else in this world."

[1] ***The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)****, which had ended only the previous year when this novel was completed in London in July 1989.*
[2] ***The Iranian Revolution of 1979****.*

Chapter Two

When my husband and children left, time suddenly seemed to lose its energy and began dragging its heels, so much so that it felt as though the moments themselves might come to a complete standstill. And with all that time on my hands, I had no idea what to do with myself.

The day nurses' shift ended, and the night nurses began making their rounds, giving the patients their evening medicines. Two nurses came into our ward with their medicine trolleys, gave Miss Betty and me our medication, and then attended to the other patients.

They then switched on the television, which I had only just noticed was on Miss Betty's side of the ward, and positioned it so that we could both watch it. But rather than watch television, I chose to lie down and distract myself by reading my book, so that I would not have to talk to anyone.

I could, of course, hear the television. There was a comedy programme on, followed by the nine o'clock news. Unfortunately, once again, reports of demonstrations by some of my fellow countrymen were among the main news stories. And once again, there were scenes of protesters shouting with their fists clenched, and women in black chadors carrying rifles and chanting slogans.

While appearing to be absorbed in my book, I suddenly felt as if all the nurses on the ward had gathered around the television, and that every patient, regardless of their condition, including Miss Betty, was watching the news with hatred and distaste, every now and then casting contemptuous glances towards my bed.

Little by little, it seemed to me that the walls and ceiling of the ward were filled with disapproving stares, looks that weighed on me like a mountain of humiliation. My eyes could no longer make out a single word in the book. I saw myself fleeing from the ward in my hospital gown. Like the wind, I raced past streets, rivers, fields and oceans. Every now and then, terrified, I would look behind me and see that same fixed, heavy, contemptuous gaze, ancient in its prejudice and still following me.

I ran. I fled. I was reduced to ashes in the explosions at the Abadan refinery[1]. I was buried in the marshes of Majnoon[2]. Across the burning minefields of Khorramshahr[3], fragments of my flesh and my very blood were scattered. Every atom of my being crumbled away with the falling ruins of Taq-e Bostan and Bisotun[4].

At every crossroads, in every town, I took my place among the tombs of the martyrs, while mothers and lovers wept bitterly for me. And with every cry of anguish, I lit a candle of mourning.

I saw that even the sun was no longer that kind, familiar sun I had longed for years to see again. Instead, it had become a gigantic mass of churning lava, exploding amid the rockets, its fiery fragments raining down upon my head from the blue heavens above.

I felt lost and alone, my loneliness as vast as the whole world, without a single place where I could find solace.

It felt as though I were suffocating. I wanted to open my mouth as wide as the heavens and scream:

“What more do you want from my soul? Leave me alone... alone... I do not want to go on living merely for the sake of being alive. I only want to stay alive long enough to destroy the enemy with my own hands, this monster that, to me, has neither flesh nor skin and feels nothing. The enemy... the enemy...”

I am not sure how long I remained in that state of madness, until, with great effort, I dragged myself up from its depths and returned to the surface of reason. Then, without anyone noticing, I lifted my gaze from the book for a moment and looked around the ward.

Only then did I realise that, contrary to what I had imagined, there were only a few people around the ward at that moment. Even Miss Betty was lying on her side with her back to the television, reading her book.

But the blow I had suffered in those few moments had been so severe and overwhelming that my whole body was trembling and my nerves were in turmoil. I closed my book and pulled the sheet over my head, hoping I might fall asleep. It was no use. Worse still, the pain had returned with even greater force.

Once again, my thoughts returned to the wheelchair and to what might ultimately become of me. My heart ached. I wished I could become a child again, a very small child. I wished I could go back to those days when my mother’s embrace was the safest refuge in the world from every hardship.

I remembered myself at four or five years old, in those days when, whenever I misbehaved or did something my mother considered impolite, she would send me to my room for ten or fifteen minutes, depending on what I had done.

Those minutes would pass for me with the bitterness and slowness of a century. From the very first moment, I would begin apologising and continue until the time was up. Then, the moment my mother opened the door with a broad, loving smile, I would become joyful and carefree again, bounding like a little kid goat as I raced out into our garden and began running and jumping up and down.

How simple and carefree life had been in those days, untouched by all this anxiety. Sadly, even my mother, with all the magic of her boundless love, could no longer bring me comfort at moments such as these. So overwhelmed by turmoil and restlessness, I no longer knew what to do with myself.

While I was still in that state of utter bewilderment, a nurse entered the ward, switched off the main lights and said to me:

“Why are you up and walking around? Are you in pain? You should be asleep by now. If you can’t sleep, switch on the reading light above your bed, lie down and read until you feel sleepy.”

Only then did I realise that I was not actually in my bed at all, but had been wandering around the open space in the middle of the ward for some time. For how long? I had no idea. I did not even know when I had got out of bed.

Bewildered as I was, I replied to the nurse:

“I’m in a lot of pain. I can’t sleep. I don’t know what to do.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll go and speak to the doctor about your pain and get you something to ease it and help you relax.”

It was not long before the same nurse returned, came over to me and said:

“Here you are. Lie down. I’ve brought you the medication.”

She handed me the tablets with a glass of water, saying:

“Take these. I’m sure that within half an hour you’ll be fast asleep.”

Just then, the patient in the bed beside mine began making groaning sounds. Not like snoring, but more like someone who was suffocating. The nurse hurried over to her, pressed the emergency button above her bed, and within moments a team of seven or eight doctors and nurses had gathered around her. They drew the curtains around the bed.

And then there was only me, my loneliness, and the presence of death so close beside me...

I was trembling inside with fear. I wished that at least Miss Betty was awake so that I could talk to her.

I was somewhere between sleeping and waking when I heard a voice:

“Coffee or tea? With milk or without? One spoonful of sugar or two?”

I opened my eyes and raised myself slightly. My gaze fell on the clock on the wall. It was seven in the morning. I could hardly believe that morning had already come.

Just then, Miss Betty woke and sat up. When she saw me, she greeted me warmly, with the easy familiarity of someone who already knew me well:

“Good morning. How are you? Did you sleep well? What a beautiful morning!”

I replied:

“Good morning. I’m not too bad. How are you? But really, what exactly is beautiful about such a gloomy morning?”

Miss Betty, who had clearly not expected such an answer, looked at me in surprise. For a moment, she gazed intently into my eyes before saying:

“I see. Of course, you're quite right. Your back is to the window, so you can't see the sky.”

I turned around and looked at the sky. Here and there, it was filled with clouds. Oh, what clouds! Pale grey, dark grey and black. Only one small corner of the horizon, over to my left, remained open, revealing a patch of clear blue. Sunlight shimmered from the edge of a cloud across that patch of blue, and for a few moments it could awaken hope in one's heart.

I said to Miss Betty:

"You're a very optimistic person."

Miss Betty replied calmly:

"And you're a very interesting person! Let's have our tea. Then we'll go and freshen ourselves up. After breakfast, if you have some time, I'd like us to have a good chat so that I can get to know you properly!"

I grumbled to myself: *"No! You see, however much you try to keep to yourself, people still won't leave you alone!"*

Then I glanced towards the bed on my right and saw that it was empty. My instinct told me that the patient must have died during the night.

I remembered how, the night before, in the midst of all my fear and helplessness, I had wished that I could talk to Miss Betty. Now I felt ashamed of my reluctance to talk to her, and disappointed in myself and my own selfishness.

I got up and slowly walked over to her bed. Pointing towards the empty bed, I said quietly:

"I simply can't believe it. It's terrifying!"

Miss Betty took my hands in hers and said very gently:

"Why are you trembling like this? Death isn't something terrifying. Like life, it's a natural part of existence. Sooner or later, it comes to every living thing. What is terrifying is an untimely death. Deaths caused by human beings are terrifying. As for her, I think she has been released from her suffering. It was obvious that she was very ill and in pain. She was also very old. For her, death was a blessing."

My mouth was completely dry. In a hoarse voice, I said:

"You're a very unusual person!"

Then I returned to my own bed and, with great effort, drank my tea.

[1]***Abadan refinery****: A major oil refinery in south-western Iran, heavily damaged during the Iran–Iraq War.*
[2]***Majnoon:*** *The Majnoon marshlands and islands on the Iran–Iraq border were a major battleground during the Iran–Iraq War. The Persian word majnoon also means "mad" or "madly in love" and carries the familiar literary association with Majnun of Layla and Majnun.*
[3]***Khorramshahr:*** *A major Iranian port city near the Iraqi border, devastated during some of the fiercest fighting of the Iran–Iraq War.*
[4]***Taq-e Bostan and Bisotun:*** *Ancient historic sites in western Iran, both near Kermanshah, associated with some of Iran's most important pre-Islamic monuments and rock reliefs.*

Chapter Three

That morning, although Miss Betty and I tried several times to begin a conversation, each time we were interrupted by the doctor's rounds or by different nurses taking me to various parts of the hospital for X-rays and all manner of tests. We never really had the opportunity to talk properly or, as she put it, to truly get to know one another.

But when they brought our lunch and we had eaten, Miss Betty said to me:

“Well, do you think you're free now?”

I replied:

“Yes. They told me they have nothing more to do with me until tonight.”

With childlike delight, she said:

“Wonderful! Then let's go to the television room and find ourselves a quiet corner where we can sit and talk. We'll tell the head nurse too, so that if they need us in the meantime, they can find us there.”

The television lounge was adorned with prints of works by Gauguin and Monet, which made you forget the silence, stillness and melancholy of the hospital.

I sat down in one of the lightweight armchairs, and Miss Betty moved the one beside it until she was almost directly opposite me. She then sat down and said:

“That's better. I always like to be face to face with someone when I'm talking to them. Well, first of all, my dear lady, tell me where you're from.”

Hearing this question, I was completely taken aback. I felt hurt and replied with a touch of resentment:

“I don't know why, but I didn't expect such a question from you. For a few hours, I foolishly imagined you were different from everyone else. Now I see that you're all the same. It's as though, without an identity document, they don't even see you as a living, breathing person. They have to know who you are before they can regard you as one. So, if that's what matters, let me tell you: yes, I am Iranian. I come from the land of barbarians, savages and terrorists. Is that better now?”

Then I lowered my head and fell silent.

In a voice that held both surprise and delight, Miss Betty said:

“I had an idea that you might be Iranian, but I really don't understand why you've become so upset. No, I really don't understand. I know Iran, your homeland, very well. Yesterday, when you were talking to your husband and children, I could tell from your accent that you must be Iranian. It seems I can still recognise Persian. Well, I even know a few sentences. Anyway, if my question upset you, I'm sorry. But I'm very happy to have met you!”

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. I had no idea what she really meant and said rather indifferently:

“I'm glad that you're happy too. But I really don't know how well you know my homeland. To be honest, it’s not that important to me! I'm very tired now. It makes no difference to me whether you think of Iran as the land of black gold and the King of Kings, or as a land of ignorance, madness and war.”

Miss Betty replied in a firm and serious voice:

“Your pain comes from prejudgement.”

Her words reminded me of my husband. Miss Betty continued:

“Do you know why? Because to me, it is none of the things you mentioned! To me, Iran is the land of sunshine and truth, the land of Khayyam, Hafez and Saadi. It is the land of my childhood.”

Now I was completely bewildered and at a loss. I raised my head to look at her and make sure that the person saying these things really existed, that she wasn't a figment of my imagination. Then, in the old, weathered face before me, I saw two captivating blue eyes filled with childlike innocence and purity, gazing at me with a restless, affectionate concern. It reminded me of my mother. I had only ever seen such an intense look in her eyes and, sometimes, in the loving gaze of a dog.

She was looking at me closely. Not with one of those superficial glances people so often exchange without really seeing one another, nor with those looks that scrutinise and judge another person from head to toe. No. Hers was an unusual gaze that made you feel that everything within you, all your feelings, lay exposed before the person looking at you, and yet you did not feel uneasy. You still felt safe. You felt that you could trust her easily, love her and allow yourself to be loved.

I lowered my head again in embarrassment and said:

“I owe you an apology. It's obvious that you have a great deal to tell me. Please, tell me. I'm all ears. Tell me about your childhood, about Iran.”

And, as if lost in a dream and speaking to herself, she said:

“Whenever I think about my childhood, I go back to a time when I was seven or eight years old and living in your Iran with my father and mother. Then I sense a particular fragrance, a unique fragrance. I can't quite describe it.

“In my life, I have travelled to many countries. Wherever I went, I longed to fill my lungs with that light, fragrant air I remember from my childhood. But that happiness has never been granted to me.

“It is only when I travel back to Iran in my mind that the feeling comes alive and becomes tangible again, and my whole being fills with that unique fragrance. I don't know why, despite all the enchantment and love I feel for Iran, I have never managed to travel there

again. Perhaps it is so precious to me that I couldn't bear to see it again. I'm afraid I might lose my dreams. I don't know if you understand what I mean?"

Then she told me that her father had had a particular love for the literature and culture of ancient Iran and had always dreamed of living there. When the Ministry of Culture sent him to Iran as a cultural attaché, his wish came true, and he went there with his wife and child, Betty, who at the time was no more than three or four months old.

And, as her mother had later told her, the eight years they had spent in Iran were among the best years of their lives. Had Betty's paternal grandfather not died, and had her grandmother not summoned her only son, Betty's father, back to England, perhaps they would never have left Iran. They returned to England, but their connection with Iran was never severed. Betty's father was always talking to her about Iran, particularly about the poets of that land. He loved Hafez and Khayyam. His love for them was such that one of the precious gifts her father gave Betty on the occasion of her marriage was a fine edition of FitzGerald's translation of Khayyam.

That day was a strange day in my life. As she spoke to me, I felt as though I was under a spell. I did not take my eyes off her for a single moment. I was afraid that, in that very moment, when I looked again, she might no longer be there and I might have lost her.

But the few times our eyes met, her warm and familiar gaze gave me courage and took away my anxiety. When she smiled, she truly gave you her smile in all its purity and openness. A sweet, free and uncalculating smile.

I remember saying to her once:

"Miss Betty, have you ever noticed that all the doctors and nurses here have a kind of professional smile?! I mean, it's as if every morning, when they put on their uniforms, they put that particular smile on their faces as well, like a hat they put on their heads or a brooch they pin to their lapels. Their smiles don't come from deep within them."

She replied:

"You judge too quickly. I understand what their smiles mean because, as it happens, I myself was a nurse for years in this very hospital, Middlesex Hospital, and later became a head nurse. That's why, following the old habit, everyone still calls me Miss Betty rather than simply Betty.

"With all the responsibility they feel at every moment, and all that pain before their eyes, it truly takes great selflessness and courage to hide their exhaustion and worries beneath that very smile which seems artificial to you, and, with strength, present you with a calm and reassuring face."

Chapter Four

That afternoon, I lost all track of time. All I know is that by the time a nurse came into the waiting room to tell me I had a visitor, I had absolutely no idea where I was. Miss Betty talked almost without drawing breath, and in that respect, of course, she was like most elderly English women and men. They are so lonely and isolated in their lives that they wait for someone to come along and, as the saying goes, find themselves a willing pair of ears, so that they can talk without stopping, about the weather, about their neighbours. From that point of view, what they had to say was in no way comparable with what Miss Betty had to say.

When my husband saw me, his eyes lit up with surprise and delight, and he said:

“I see that you're much better than yesterday. What have they done today? Does this mean they've already reached a conclusion and given you the good news?”

And I pointed to Miss Betty, who was walking beside me, and said:

“First of all, let me introduce Miss Betty to you. A lady whom I am truly delighted to have met. She is an admirer of Iran, and spent her childhood there until the age of eight. If you see any change in me, it is thanks to her presence and to having got to know her.”

My husband, who had only just noticed Miss Betty, nodded respectfully and said:

“I am truly delighted to meet you too. What a happy coincidence!”

Then, after exchanging pleasantries and greetings, Miss Betty went over to her bed and lay down. It was not long before I was lost among the little circle of friends and acquaintances we had in this foreign land, my son and daughter, and the bouquets and flower-filled vases they had brought me. After each of them had asked about the progress of my treatment and I had answered, I found an opportunity, through the gathering of visitors, to look across at Miss Betty's bed. To my complete surprise, I realised that no one had come to visit her. Yet her face still looked happy and contented, and she was absorbed in reading her book.

In any case, after half an hour, the friends and acquaintances left, leaving my family and me alone together. I then told them that Miss Betty really was a remarkable woman. She seemed very brave and self-assured. Of course, that was hardly surprising. She had not suffered the blows that we Iranians had suffered, nor endured the pain that we had endured and continued to endure. She had been born in a country where she had spent her youth and middle age and grown old, a country that had always given her a sense of security.

My husband then said:

“But don't forget that she hasn't had a very easy life either. That much is certain, because she looks as though she must be nearly eighty, and if that's so, she has witnessed two world wars.”

Then, as he said goodbye, he added:

“I'm sure you'll feel more at ease tonight than you did last night. I'm a little less worried now too. It looks as though we should be going now. All the visitors have left. Take care of yourself. In the meantime, thank this new friend of yours, Miss Betty, on behalf of all of us, for bringing about such a change in your spirits and how you're feeling. Goodbye until tomorrow.”

But when they left, and with the sound of their footsteps my familiar world receded, my heart was once again filled, as it had been the night before, with the sorrow of loneliness and anxiety. Fortunately, Miss Betty was still awake. I got down from my bed, walked slowly towards hers and said softly:

“Miss Betty, I hope I'm not disturbing you. Do you mind if I sit here beside your bed? I'm still not sleepy.”

Miss Betty closed the book she was reading, sat up in bed, and her wrinkled face opened into a smile as she said:

“You’re not disturbing me at all. Please sit down. I’m not sleepy either.”

Suddenly I realised that it was not right for there to be so many flowers around my bed while she had none at all. With a brief apology, I went back to my bed, brought over two of the flower-filled vases and placed them on her bedside cabinet beside her framed photographs.

Miss Betty thanked me and said:

“Well, my dear friend, so now you have officially come to visit me, haven't you?!”

My eyes fell on the two framed photographs on her bedside cabinet. One showed a very handsome young man sitting at a piano, gazing at you with his captivating eyes. The structure of his face, his bone structure and the expression in his eyes bore a striking resemblance to Miss Betty herself. The other photograph showed a relatively young man in military uniform. Very dignified and distinguished. I think Miss Betty noticed my curiosity, because she said:

“You know, that young man in military uniform is my husband, and the other one is my son. Both photographs were taken forty-odd years ago.”

I plucked up the courage, picked up the album and asked:

“May I have a look?”

With her permission, I began turning the pages. On the first pages of the album were photographs of Miss Betty's wedding; of her son from the time of his birth until he was about fifteen or sixteen, surrounded by his mother, father and family; and a photograph of a beautiful young woman who, I gathered from Miss Betty's explanation, was her closest friend.

But as I continued turning the pages, I saw photographs of this same young woman with a very pretty little girl whom Miss Betty said was her own daughter! Then there was another photograph of the same young woman with the little girl and the handsome, dignified man who was Miss Betty's husband!

The order of the photographs began to confuse me. The further I went, the more I realised that there were no longer any photographs of Miss Betty in the album! Her son no longer appeared either, and everywhere I saw the little girl, whom Miss Betty had said was her daughter, in the arms of her friend. Then there were photographs of the girl when she was grown up and on her wedding night, in one or two of which Miss Betty could also be seen with the bride and groom.

On the last two pages of the album were photographs of Miss Betty at approximately the same age as she appeared to me then, in a decorated room with a Christmas tree, between two boys of about ten or twelve, with an arm affectionately around each of them.

Bewildered by the photographs, I asked her for a full explanation. She replied slowly and deliberately:

“My dear friend, I think you may have forgotten that I’m having surgery tomorrow. Leave these explanations for another time. If I survive, I wouldn’t mind telling you many things. For now, let me just say this much: you have met all the members of my family. These people you have seen are the treasures of my life. Unfortunately, they live so far away from me that wherever I go, they cannot come to see me. I have grown accustomed to having at least their photographs with me wherever I am.

“Yes, if I survive, I have a great deal to talk to you about. After all, I would like our friendship to continue and not end with our acquaintance here in the hospital.”

Fortunately, Miss Betty survived the operation and went through her period of convalescence. As for me, after about two weeks in hospital, the doctors determined through all manner of tests that I did not have cancer and that my fate was not to end in a wheelchair. The pains I was suffering from were rheumatic and arthritic, aggravated by nervous tension, and could be controlled with painkillers. But above all, I somehow had to come to terms with myself and help myself.

Chapter Five

During my stay in hospital, I tried not to listen to too much of the news. If I happened to hear something, I made an effort to keep myself under control, to rein in my more intense emotions and, in a sense, to train myself.

In the first week after her operation, Miss Betty was still far from well, and I was deeply worried about her. Whenever I had some free time, I would sit beside her bed and watch her for a while, or simply stay there and read my book.

Her slight frame and quiet air of resignation and acceptance reminded me of my mother, who, whenever she was ill, would endure her pain without lament or complaint. At such moments, my heart ached for Miss Betty. Whenever she opened her eyes, I wanted her to know that she was not alone, that I was there beside her.

In the evenings, when my husband and children came to see me, we would often go over to her bedside and, so to speak, all visit her together. By the end of the first week, there was a noticeable improvement in her condition. She could now manage a smile when someone asked how she was and, whatever state she was in, say:

“I’m feeling much better!”

Over the course of the second week, she gradually regained her strength, and before long there were moments when we could even chat together.

What seemed strange was that the only person who came to visit her at the hospital was an elderly woman, who made the trip three times. I later discovered that she was her neighbour. Dr Wright, however, her surgeon and attending physician, together with one or two younger doctors, the nurses and the head nurse, looked in on her regularly and treated her with great respect. After the operation, they brought her bouquets and pots of flowers every day.

One of the times I had the chance to have a proper talk with Miss Betty was on my last day in hospital. After lunch, I went over to her bedside and found her in unusually low spirits and clearly upset.

I asked anxiously:

“Miss Betty, are you in pain? Aren’t you feeling well?”

“No, I’m not in pain,” she replied. “I feel very well too!”

I said teasingly:

“Then what’s the matter? Perhaps you’re upset because this afternoon I’ll be taking my leave of you!”

Her low spirits vanished in an instant, and she said happily:

“What? You’re being discharged? I had no idea! I’m so pleased. More than anything, I’m happy that, despite all those worries, it’s finally turned out that there’s nothing seriously wrong with you.

“Now, before I forget, you must write down your home address and telephone number for me. I’ll give you mine too. I know where I stand now as well; I’m being discharged in two days.

“Tell me, do your husband and children know that their home will be full of light tonight? I really like your husband. He is a fine, respectable man. And I’ve noticed how much your children care about you. My dear friend, you have a good family. You are fortunate. Cherish these days of your life.”

In her own gentle way, she was reminding me how fortunate I was.

“Of course, Miss Betty,” I replied, handing her a piece of paper on which I had already written my address and telephone number.

“Here you are. I’ve written everything down for you. But you still haven’t told me why you’re not laughing and being your usual mischievous self.”

Miss Betty said:

“Well, this morning that social worker came to see me, the gentleman who seems to think he has my best interests at heart. He said, ‘After this operation, we don’t think it would be wise for you to go on living in your own home. It’s too risky. You should go to a home for the elderly, where you can be properly cared for.’

“Then, as though he were trying to coax a child, he began telling me about all the advantages of an old people’s home, and about the nurses and staff there who would look after you and attend to your needs. It was exactly the same last year when I had my appendix operation.”

Seeing how upset she was deeply saddened me.

“What did you say?” I asked.

Miss Betty replied:

“I said, ‘My dear sir, all my life I have lived simply and independently. You talk to me about the advantages of an old people’s home, but I have to tell you that even if it were a palace, I would still prefer my own small, humble home, where I am both my own mistress and my own servant.’”

“Was he convinced?” I asked.

“No. He went on expressing his concern and preaching to me, and once again I told him that I was not prepared to give up my freedom and independence for any advantage whatsoever. In the end, he became rather upset and left.

“You know, Firoozeh, I really have been like this all my life. I have never wanted to take away another person’s freedom, nor have I wanted to lose my own.

“I remember it was the seventh year of our marriage when my husband was promoted to major, and one of the privileges that came with his promotion was a posting to India. When he told me the news, contrary to what he had expected, I wasn’t pleased at all.

“In fact, I openly objected. I told him that I would be ashamed to join the ranks of those colonialists, those ramrod-straight ‘civilised thieves’, living in grand houses and going elephant hunting while Indian servants waited on us hand and foot.

“Fortunately, my husband was an honourable man. He readily accepted my reasoning and turned down the offer.”

I said:

“Miss Betty, forgive me for asking, but how is it that Mrs Nicholson, I mean your next-door neighbour, is able to live alone in her own home? She looks considerably older than you.”

“Mrs Nicholson isn’t alone,” she replied. “Her niece, a middle-aged woman who has been widowed for a few years, lives with her.”

After a pause, she continued:

“You know, I think my problem is that I have always hated waiting. When they take you to an old people’s home, it is as though they are saying to you, ‘Well, you have nothing left to do now. Sit here and wait your turn.’

“Then suddenly it strikes you: what exactly are you waiting for? And that’s when you realise what it is you are waiting for.

“That is when life loses its colour. That state of suspension breaks you down. And because time passes so slowly there, the waiting goes on for so long that gradually you are no longer simply waiting. You become the waiting itself. And that simply doesn’t suit my restless nature.

“You know, what I want is to be able to make my own coffee with milk every morning, and drink it wherever I please in my own home. Do you see what I mean?

“When you still have that freedom of choice, it means you are still in the midst of things. You are within life itself, in its very pulse and vitality, rather than sitting on the sidelines watching it.

“I really don’t understand by what standard we Westerners are called democrats! From the moment we are born, our sleep, our food, our education, our future careers, even the way we are to spend the final days of our lives are all decided for us. How, then, can we consider ourselves free? Everything is planned.

“No. This last plan, at least, I will not submit to for as long as I can help it.”

And she did not. Two days after I was discharged from hospital, I telephoned her at home. She answered the phone herself, and the clear, ringing sound of her voice told me that she was cheerful and in good spirits. We agreed that sometime in the next few days she would invite my family and me to her home.

After that, every few days, either she or I would telephone the other to see how things were. Then, one morning towards the end of spring, among the letters in the morning post, I received a card from her.

When I opened the envelope, to my surprise I saw that the card was written in Persian!

I could hardly believe it.

From her handwriting, it was obvious that she had made a great effort to write correctly and legibly, rather like a child who had only just learnt to write.

It read:

“Dear friend, I invite you and your family that you come to my house Sunday. Three in the afternoon, this Sunday, 15 June. Loving you all. Betty.”

I showed the card to my husband and said:

“Can you believe it?”

“She really is an extraordinary woman!” he replied.

Delighted, I said:

“Just imagine! It turns out she can read and write Persian too, and all this time she had never let on!”

And so my curiosity about this elderly woman grew with each passing day, and getting to know her and her world began to hold a particular fascination for me.

Chapter Six

That Sunday afternoon, when I went to Miss Betty's house for the first time with my husband, son and daughter, remains one of the unforgettable days of my life. I enjoyed every moment of it.

Like most middle-class English homes, hers was a fairly small, two-storey house in West London. Even before we went inside, what struck me most was the charm of the surroundings and the abundance of flowers and greenery in front of Miss Betty's house. Unusually, a gentle sun was shining and the sky was a brilliant blue.

We rang the bell. Miss Betty herself opened the door with that broad smile of hers and showed us into her sitting room, which was fairly large. Once we had all settled wherever we pleased, I looked around.

Unlike the interiors of most English homes, which seemed to me dark, stuffy and rather mysterious, this room was flooded with light from large windows on two sides. To the south, the view was of the flower-filled back garden. A low box hedge marked the boundary of the property, separating it from the lush, sturdy trees along the edge of the park.

The furniture and furnishings were immaculately clean and seemed to gleam. The colours were all light, in varying shades of pale and deeper peach. In the centre of one wall stood an old wood-burning fireplace, surrounded by delicate ornamental plasterwork.

On the mantelpiece, framed photographs of various sizes and several porcelain figurines had been arranged with particular care and taste. The spaces on either side of the fireplace had been turned into bookshelves reaching from floor to ceiling.

At the other end of the room stood a piano, with sheets of music resting on it, and it was clear that Miss Betty amused herself by playing when she was alone.

Most interesting of all, among the paintings of English and Scottish landscapes hanging on the walls were two pictures of Iran: one of the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque in Isfahan, the other of the columns of Persepolis.

There was also a fairly large portrait of Miss Betty as a young woman, whose beauty and simplicity seemed to invite the viewer to stop and look more closely.

My husband, who was clearly delighted by the room, turned to Miss Betty and said:

"Miss Betty, your home is like a little corner of paradise."

"That is very kind of you," she replied. "Perhaps it is because I have tried to alter the design of this room so that it is not too far removed from my dream of your sun-filled Iran. I like this room more than any other in the house."

"I can see that," I said. "Miss Betty, if I may speak frankly, the more we get to know you, the more we like you; and at the same time, the more you surprise us!"

Miss Betty laughed.

“You mean you are surprised that you like me more?”

“No, you know perfectly well that isn’t what I meant,” I said. “I’m surprised by your fascination with Iran. And there are many other things that surprise me too! When we read your note, written in that beautiful Persian handwriting of yours, we were quite speechless for a while. After all, you had never told me that you could read and write Persian.”

“Well, firstly, I saw no particular reason to tell you,” Miss Betty replied. “And secondly, you saw for yourself how many mistakes there were in my handwriting and spelling. What little I know is hardly enough to count for much. But I will tell you one thing: I read Persian better than I write it.

“After all, I went to school in Iran until the second year of primary school. And after we returned to England, while I was still a teenager, my father often taught me Persian whenever we were together in our spare time.

“Later, when I was older, he would read Khayyam and Hafez to me, and sometimes Rumi as well, and with the help of English translations he would help me understand their poetry. I have the Persian texts and their English translations here in my library.

“Whenever I feel downhearted, I seek refuge in them. They have an extraordinary effect on me. Like music, they carry me away from the troubles and preoccupations of everyday life.

“One of these days I shall have to become a very serious pupil of yours and learn Persian all over again.”

Her tone was so resolute that I knew she was not saying this merely to please us. I looked at her with admiration and remained silent.

There was such vitality in this elderly woman that, little by little, you forgot the lines and wrinkles on her face and found yourself looking instead at an exceptionally intelligent young woman with a passion for knowledge.

When she noticed our silence, she rose, went over to the bookcase and took down two books. She handed my husband a translation of Hafez by Gertrude Bell, and gave me FitzGerald’s translation of Khayyam.

Then she turned to my son and daughter, who were still sitting silently, and said:

“You two have been sitting there so quietly, without a word. I have kept your mother and father occupied with books, and now I have a job for the two of you as well. I’m not going to let you off so easily! Come into the kitchen with me and we’ll put together a little afternoon tea and bring it in.

“That’s old age for you! There’s nothing to be done about it. The young have to take the old under their wing.”

Then she laughed and added:

“Mind you, if my daughter Charlotte were here, she would say, ‘As usual, Aunt Betty only becomes old when it suits her, because then it pays to be old!’”

When she left the room with my son and daughter, I looked at my husband in surprise.

“Did you notice that? I don’t understand. If Miss Betty is Charlotte’s mother, why does Charlotte call her Aunt Betty?”

“You’re right,” my husband said. “I noticed it too. There’s no doubt she is a rather unusual woman.”

That afternoon we ate the most delicious ginger cake, baked by Miss Betty herself, with tea, coffee, assorted biscuits and small sandwiches.

As I enjoyed her hospitality, I said:

“There is something else about you that surprises me: your hospitality. Forgive me, but what I mean is that your manner is not altogether English!”

“Well,” she replied, “I’m not altogether English either. My father was Scottish and my mother English.”

Our conversation then turned to the things that interested my son and daughter.

When Miss Betty discovered how much my daughter loved painting, her eyes lit up with pleasure and, turning to her proudly, she said:

“My daughter paints too. She is an artist.”

She pointed towards the portrait of herself as a young woman and continued:

“That portrait you see there was painted by my daughter from one of my photographs when I was young. Of course, my daughter is roughly the same age as your mother now.”

She then turned to my son and said:

“But boys, on the whole, tend to be more interested in the sciences. My grandsons, although one is only ten and the other twelve, already see themselves as future astronauts. Well, why not?

“As long as men working in scientific fields use their work to improve human life, what they do is admirable, and I respect them all just as much as I respect artists and thinkers such as Camus and Bertrand Russell.”

Then, addressing my husband, she said:

“Firoozeh has told me a great deal about you. I know that you are a thoughtful man with an appreciation of the arts. Well, that is fortunate for all of us. Now, if you please, I would like you to read me one or two poems by Hafez and explain their meaning to me; only, of course, at a level that a beginner like me can understand.”

Chapter Seven

The following day, I telephoned Miss Betty to thank her for her hospitality.

“Not at all. Please, don’t stand on ceremony with me,” she replied. “You know perfectly well how happy your visit made me; besides, I got a great deal out of it myself.

“By the way, there is one other thing I should tell you. I realise that there are many things about me that must seem surprising to you and your husband. You mentioned that yesterday. I’m sorry I didn’t explain.

“The truth is, it isn’t some small matter that I can simply talk about and explain to you. It is the story of my life. Remembering certain periods of my life is very painful for me. But one day I shall explain it all to you.”

In the days that followed, as the railway station was only three or four minutes from each of our homes, and a direct train could take us to one another within twenty minutes, we saw each other quite often.

However, once she had told me over the telephone that recalling some of her memories was painful for her, I never again asked her to explain her life to me or to speak about her past.

She herself often spoke about her daughter and grandchildren. With great affection, she would tell me about the things they did, the things they enjoyed, their travels, and even their favourite expressions and little turns of phrase.

It was through these scattered conversations that I learnt that her daughter and son-in-law lived in Sydney. Her son-in-law was a manager with one of the IBM companies, and her daughter taught literature at a secondary school.

Every year during the summer holidays, her grandchildren came to visit her with their parents. That particular summer, however, all of them, her grandchildren, daughter and son-in-law, had gone to America. But she was expecting her grandchildren for Christmas.

Gradually, I grew so close to her that if a day passed without my hearing from her, my heart would sink. She had come to be one of my dearest friends.

More than that, in some way she helped to fill the void left by my mother while I was far from home.

I would tell her about all my worries, anxieties and homesickness, and she would listen with kindness. Sometimes she would advise me, sometimes comfort me, and somehow she always found a way to soothe me.

I found it harder to speak to my children about my hardships and sorrows, because in their youth they often could not truly understand what I was feeling.

I also tried to say less to my husband, because I could see that he too, far from home, was caught up in the same sorrows as I was. I was not, after all, the only one suffering.

But when I spoke to Miss Betty, I no longer felt the need to hold anything back. With her, it was different. She loved Iran and knew the country reasonably well, but she had no loved ones there, in those circumstances, whose situation might make what I told her a further source of anxiety.

I remember that whenever I was particularly upset, she would ask me to speak to her in Persian, so that I could express my feelings freely and without restraint.

And from the things she said afterwards, I could tell that she had understood very well how I felt; and then I would find some peace.

Chapter Eight

It was an unusual summer, unusual in that, unlike previous years, we had a relatively large number of sunny days. Whenever we went to Miss Betty's house, the weather was often so mild and the sky so blue and brilliant that we could not bring ourselves to sit indoors. Instead, we would sit in her garden, drinking tea and coffee, eating biscuits and talking, and for an hour or two we would forget the concerns of everyday life.

One day I said to her:

"Miss Betty, your roses are extraordinary. I think that if you entered them in a competition for the best rose of the year, you would win."

She replied with pride:

"I think so too."

Then, with childlike delight, she continued:

"By the way, did you know that all my roses have names? I mean, each one of them is named after someone I love."

She showed me the roses, each one bearing a small metal label engraved with the name of her father, mother, husband, son, son-in-law, grandchildren or one of her friends.

"There is another rose over here, near the sitting room, which I added only two months ago," she said, leading me towards it.

It was a small bush, but it was covered in deeply fragrant pink roses. It reminded me of the roses used to make the famous rosewater of Kashan.

She showed me the metal label. On it was the name Firoozeh.

"I planted this rose in memory of Iran, and named it after you."

That day she spoke to me about her childhood, her memories of Iran, and her mother and father. I sat quietly and listened.

As she spoke, her gaze seemed to drift farther and farther away from me. I saw in her face the same expression I had seen in the portrait of her as a young woman. I could see her, but she no longer saw me. She was with me, and yet she was not.

She said:

"I adored my mother. But her tremendous pride, her aristocratic manner and that English reserve which was always a part of her meant that I was never very close to her. With my father, on the other hand, I felt completely at ease.

“I remember the last year we were in Iran. It was the night of Chaharshanbe Suri.[1] I begged my mother to let me go qashoq-zani[2] like the other children, but as usual she refused. Fortunately, my father was at home. I appealed to him, and he persuaded my mother to let me go. So I went qashoq-zani with Ali and Maryam, who were very close friends of mine.

“What fun we had in that carefree world of childhood!

“What is interesting is that your Chaharshanbe Suri customs bear some resemblance to Scottish New Year traditions.[3] Perhaps that is why I have never forgotten it.

“In the old days in Scotland, when midnight came on New Year’s Eve, anyone who wished would put a little coal, salt, sugar and bread into a bowl and set off. The coal represented warmth and light; the salt, the seasoning of life; the sugar, the sweetness of life; and the bread, abundance and blessing.

“The person carrying these things could knock on any door. It made no difference whether the house belonged to a friend, a relative or a complete stranger. The householder would open the door, take the bowl and invite the visitor inside as a guest.

“If the visitor wished, they would go in. If not, the householder would replace what had been taken from the bowl with cake and steak pie, and there at the doorway they would drink to one another’s health and wish each other a Happy New Year.”

Another day, while I was at Miss Betty’s house, she said during our conversation:

“When we left Iran because of my grandfather’s illness and went to Scotland, I was so distressed at being away from Iran, and from those Iranian friends of mine, the brother and sister I told you about, Ali and Maryam, that I became ill. I was ill for two whole months.

“It took me a long time to grow accustomed to my new school and surroundings. Unfortunately, towards the end of that first year, my grandfather died, and not long afterwards my grandmother died too. Then, at my mother’s insistence, we moved to London. After all, most of her family lived there.

“And so the hardship and loneliness of being a stranger began all over again.

“My mother was adamant that, in keeping with aristocratic custom, I should be sent to boarding school. Fortunately, my father objected because he knew I would not be able to bear it. Instead, I was enrolled in a private girls’ school.

“The first three months there were like a nightmare. I knew no one. I was not doing as well in my lessons as the other girls, and my accent meant that they often mocked me and made fun of me outside the classroom.

“I was always alone. And not only at school; I was alone at home as well.

“That same year my mother gave birth to my brother, and all her attention, together with that of the maid we had, was devoted to the little boy.

“If I had not had my father in those days to understand how I felt and to talk to me so often about Iran, I think I would have wasted away from loneliness and jealousy of my brother.

“Then, after three months, something changed at school. It was the first day after the end of the first term. When I went into the classroom, I saw a girl sitting in the seat to my right whom I had never seen before. She had a sweet, gentle face, but there was sadness and anxiety in her eyes.

“That very day, during the break, I became friends with her. I discovered that she was from Wales and that her family had moved to London only a week earlier. So we were both alone and strangers.

“But within two weeks we had grown so close that we forgot our loneliness.

“Her name was Mary, and every time I called her name it reminded me of my Iranian friend Maryam. We became very fond of one another, and that friendship gave both of us courage and self-confidence.

“It even affected our schoolwork. When the results of the end-of-year examinations came out, Mary and I were among the best pupils in the class.

“Gradually, because of the friendship between us children, our families came to know one another and eventually became close friends too.

“During those years of childhood and adolescence, four of which fell during the First World War, there was almost nothing we would not do for one another. Even now, we both remember the shadow cast by those terrible days and nights.”

At that moment, I looked at her and saw that her face had tightened with intense pain. Even so, I remained silent and motionless. For a few moments I even held my breath, so that she would not become aware of my presence and would continue telling her story.

I thought that perhaps telling it was a comfort to her as well.

But when she came to the years of the war, she passed quickly over them without going into detail. Perhaps she could not bear to remember them. Or perhaps she was being considerate of me.

After a few moments, her troubled expression relaxed, and once again the gentle glow of those sweet dreams of youth returned to her eyes. She continued:

“It was after the war; we were twelve or thirteen. Mary’s father had travelled to America for some reason, and when he returned, among the presents he had brought her was a small leather-bound notebook with gold edging and a delicate gold pen fitted into its side.

“In those days, particularly in the difficult conditions after the war, notebooks of that kind could not be found in London. And yet, the day after her father returned, when Mary saw me, she insisted that I take it.

“How could I ever forget such generosity and kindness? I still have that little leather-bound notebook with its gold edging among my treasures. In later years, its pages became filled with literary passages and love poems.

“We were true friends in every sense of the word, without ever being rivals for a single moment. We took such pleasure in one another’s successes that our other friends were often jealous of us.

“And so we grew up together and finished secondary school. For my higher education, I chose music and opera, while Mary chose medicine. We were both in our second year at university when we fell in love.

“Mary fell in love with a young man who was a year ahead of her at medical school, and I fell in love with David, her father’s cousin, who was about four years older than Mary and me. In fact, I had known him ever since Mary and I became friends, because whenever our families gathered together, I would see him there too.

“He was an exceptionally gifted young man. He was brilliant at physics, chemistry and mathematics, and he also knew a great deal about music. From childhood, he had had a piano teacher who came to the house, and he adored Mozart and Beethoven.

“But in spite of all that, when he finished school, he entered military college. By the time Mary and I graduated from university, he had completed his training there and had grown into a tall, striking and very attractive young man.

“We often went on picnics together with the other boys and girls, and I always behaved towards him just as I did towards the other boys in the family. I was completely natural and at ease with him.

“Everything changed that Christmas, during my second year at university.

“Before Christmas, Mary had told me that she was in love, and she had invited Philip, her boyfriend, to the Christmas Eve party as well. That year we were all invited to Mary’s house.

“David came that evening as he always did, but this time he arrived in uniform. He had just been promoted to captain, and the uniform suited him very well.

“When it was time to dance, he came and stood before me, very formal and serious. In military fashion, he clicked his heels together, bowed his head respectfully and asked me to dance with him. I was rather taken aback by all that seriousness.

“That night he did not leave me for a moment. He danced only with me all evening, and towards the end of the night, when we happened to find ourselves beneath the mistletoe as we were dancing, he almost lifted me off the floor; he was, after all, much taller than I was. Then he kissed me lovingly on the lips.

“Until then, whenever he kissed me, it had always been affectionately on the forehead or cheek. But at that moment, I suddenly realised that I had fallen in love with him.

“And from that day, my suffering began!

“I could no longer be as natural and at ease with him as I had been before. I loved him so much that seeing him had become both essential to me and unbearable!

“At parties and picnics, I would often pray that he would not come near me, or even look at me, because I knew that the slightest moment of closeness between us would be enough to make me confess that I loved him. And with the pride I had inherited from my mother, I would have been ashamed to make such a confession unless he first told me plainly that he loved me.

“Whenever we were all together, I tried to sit somewhere with his back towards me, so that at least I could watch him from behind in peace.

“In those days, I often wished I were an Arab girl and could wear a veil, so that I might gaze at my beloved face to face without fear.

“And many nights I cried until morning because I had prevented us from talking to one another and had let those opportunities slip away.

“This went on for three or four months, until finally, one day when Mary and I were alone together, she said:

“‘I don’t understand why your behaviour towards David has changed. Yesterday he was talking to me about you, but not as he usually does. He spoke like a man in love who has no hope of kindness or affection from the woman he loves.

“‘Please tell me clearly how you feel about him. If his love really does upset you, I can let him know indirectly that his impression is right. He is suffering a great deal.’

“When Mary realised that I loved him, and I told her just how much I loved him, she showered my face with kisses and said:

“‘Betty, you have made my happiness complete today. For some time I had felt guilty that I alone had come to know love. But I cannot understand how you managed to keep this from me for so long!’

“The next time I saw David, I lowered my eyes and tried to walk past him, just as I had been doing for the previous three or four months. But he took my hand and stopped me.

“I could feel the weight of his longing gaze upon my face as he said:

“‘I’m not going to let my little Betty run away from me any longer. You have been the queen of my dreams for years!’

“Then he placed his other hand beneath my chin and gently lifted my face towards his. Looking straight into my eyes, he said:

“‘My little one, will you share life’s journey with me and make me the happiest man of the century?’

“I had imagined that moment and waited for it for so long that when it finally came, I could not speak. Tears filled my eyes, and I buried my face in his chest.

“We became engaged that very week, and the following year, after the end-of-year university examinations, we were married.”

I had stayed with Miss Betty much longer than usual that day. My husband, becoming worried about me, eventually telephoned her house. Had he not done so, I do not think it would even have occurred to me to leave while she was still talking.

When she realised just how long she had kept me there talking, she was full of apologies.

As I was saying goodbye, I finally plucked up the courage to ask:

“Miss Betty, I have just one request. I think this Mary is the same friend whose photographs I saw in your album at the hospital. Please, just tell me whether I am right.”

She replied:

“Yes, you are. Who else could it possibly be but my poor Mary?!”

*[1] **Chaharshanbe Suri:** An ancient Iranian festival celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz, the Persian New Year. Traditionally, it is associated with fire, celebration and customs marking the passage from the old year into the new.*
*[2] **Qashoq-zani:** Literally “spoon-banging”, a traditional Chaharshanbe Suri custom in which children or young people disguise themselves, go from house to house tapping spoons against bowls or plates, and receive sweets, nuts or other small gifts.*
*[3] **Scottish New Year tradition:** Miss Betty is referring to the Scottish Hogmanay custom of first-footing, in which visitors call at homes after midnight on New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day, traditionally bringing symbolic gifts associated with good fortune and prosperity. The precise gifts and rituals varied by family and region.*

Chapter Nine

Whenever I saw Miss Betty, if something happened to bring back a memory, she would often talk to me about her past. When she spoke of her life with her husband, she would say:

“I spent seventeen years with him. I was very happy; so happy that I think few people can ever have known such happiness. He felt exactly the same way.

“I remember one night, two or three hours after midnight, I realised that he was still awake beside me. Worried, I asked him why he could not sleep, and he said:

“‘I’m thinking. I’m thinking about how happy we are, and how wonderful it would be if, at this very moment, we could both die together!’

“He was so dear to me that when I heard the gentle sound of his breathing, it seemed as though the whole world were breathing with him. But what he had said frightened me, and I asked:

“‘Why don’t you want us to go on living together? Why are you thinking about death?’

“And he replied:

“‘Because if we were to die at this moment, while we are so happy, we would remain just as we are for ever.’

“And now, when I think about it, I find myself wishing it really had happened that way.

“The same year we were married, I became pregnant, and the following year my son Charles was born. But I had a very difficult labour and ended up needing surgery. Afterwards, the doctor told David and me that we had been very fortunate that both my son and I were well, but that it would be better not to think of having a second child, because another pregnancy would certainly be dangerous.

“Well, after such a warning, you can imagine how anxious David and I became as Charles was growing up. We worried so much about his health that Mary would often become exasperated with us and say:

“‘You two are impossible! Just wait until I become a doctor; then I’ll be able to deal with both of you properly. You can’t go on living like this. The slightest change in that child’s temperature and you make life miserable for yourselves and for him. In fact, once I qualify, I’m going to examine Betty properly myself and see whether we can give Charles a sweet little baby sister, so that the poor child can have a little peace from the two of you!’

“Four years later, Mary qualified as a doctor and married Philip, the same young man she had been in love with. We now had two good and caring doctors in the family to guide us and rescue poor Charles from all our unnecessary precautions.

“But there was nothing they could do about my own condition, and in the end I resigned myself to my situation.

“Charles grew up and started school. Gradually our anxieties began to ease, because whenever we compared him with other children of his own age, we could see that, if anything, he seemed to be developing better than most of them. He was perfectly healthy and very intelligent. When he began secondary school, I realised that, like his father, he had a particular talent for science.

“But let me tell you about Mary and Philip. They too were a very happy couple. They loved one another and they loved their work. For that reason, for three or four years after their marriage they did not even think about having children.

“Whenever I had the opportunity, I would encourage Mary to have a baby, but each time she would find some excuse to put it off. Then one day, at last, she told me that she was pregnant. God knows how happy that news made me.

“She always told me immediately when something happened in her life. She even told me she was pregnant before she told her husband.

“What a wonderful day that was. What happy years those were. We were young, full of energy and filled with hope for the future. We often gathered together, read books, talked and listened to music. Mary and Philip would tell us about the latest advances in medicine. David would play the piano, and I would sing.

“Once, after I had sung an aria from Madama Butterfly, Mary said to David:

“‘David, if Betty had married anyone other than you, I think I would have gone mad with sorrow. In those days, she always dreamed of becoming the best opera singer and travelling all over the world. And now I see that her voice is confined within the four walls of this house. At least I’m glad that you love music too and that you understand her.’

“My husband replied:

“‘But Mary, by marrying me, Betty has brought the whole world into our home. And besides, what makes you think that one day I won’t write an opera for her myself, and the two of us will perform it together?’

“And I laughed and said:

“‘You are living the most deeply felt opera of all.’

“If only life had continued with the same gentleness and peace. But it did not.

“We were all struck by tragedy. And what devastating blows they were.

“The first fell upon poor Mary.

“She and Philip were returning by train from a short weekend away when their train collided with another. Fourteen people were killed and several others injured.

“They said that when Mary and Philip were taken to hospital, they were both unconscious, and that Philip died on the way there. Mary too was in a critical condition.

“I rushed to the hospital in terror, and there I discovered that Mary had suffered internal bleeding and had lost her baby as well.

“How can I possibly describe the pain she endured, the suffering she went through? David and I suffered with her; we shared her pain and anguish, and we did not leave her alone for a single moment.

“It was almost six months before she regained some physical and emotional balance. Then she returned to her medical work with the same intensity and devotion as before, perhaps even more than before.

“She was still very young, not yet thirty. She was beautiful, talented and full of vitality, and naturally there were many men, most of them doctors or colleagues of hers, who wanted to marry her. But she never consented.

“She always carried that silent sorrow within her.”

When Miss Betty’s story reached this point that day, I once again saw the shadow of pain on her tense face. She broke off and, on the pretext that her neighbour Mrs Nicholson was expected to call on her, said goodbye and left.

For some time, my instinct had been telling me that there was a secret in her past; a painful secret, like an old wound that time had gradually sealed over. And I would not allow my curiosity to reopen that wound and make her suffer again.

Chapter Ten

It was autumn. Cold polar winds swept in relentlessly. The sky was always overcast and dark: black, grey, leaden, as though across that vast expanse you would never again see the pure blue of the sky.

Even if you lit a thousand lamps in broad daylight, you could not break the darkness's stubborn hold. With the endless rain, the air had gone beyond merely being damp; you felt as though you were living and breathing in the midst of water, and how hard it was to breathe!

For a week, the war between Iran and Iraq had intensified. Day and night, the television news showed burned faces and bodies, covered with deep, festering wounds. And throughout that week, day and night, I had been trying to telephone Tehran to find out how my mother and father were, but I could not get through.

The telephone connection had been cut off.

I had also heard nothing from Miss Betty for about a week. Whenever I telephoned her house, no one answered.

I was distraught. I was restless and did not know where to turn for refuge, where I could find some peace and talk.

If I spoke to my husband, he would say:

"I understand your pain, but just like you, I have a mother and father there too. In fact, you have it easier because you don't have any brothers or sisters! At least you don't have the added anguish of worrying about them as well."

Talking to my friends brought no relief either, because they were just as distressed as I was.

A wave of anxiety had swept over everyone. We were all trying, by whatever means we could, to get news from Iran, particularly from Tehran, and above all to find out which areas had been bombed and what had happened to our loved ones.

One of our friends had a car, and for several days he took it upon himself to drive to Heathrow Airport and ask passengers arriving from Iran where the latest bombing had taken place.

Even when he brought us news, it gave us only a few moments of comfort, allowing us briefly to deceive ourselves into feeling reassured. We soon realised that in truth we could have no peace of mind, because the information brought by newly arrived passengers concerned conditions ten or twelve hours earlier. In the meantime, any calamity might have befallen our loved ones.

For me, the telephone was now my only hope.

I would sit there for hours, endlessly dialling numbers. First my parents' house. When I could not get through, I would try my husband's parents, then the rest of the family, friends and acquaintances, near and far.

And always to no avail.

My heart would begin to pound so violently that I could hear it beating in my ears. My mouth would go dry. Sometimes I would wonder whether our telephone was faulty. But then, after trying the number several times, I would hear the calm recorded voice, utterly oblivious to everything that was happening, saying:

"Telephone communication between London and the country you are trying to reach has temporarily been interrupted. Please try your number again later."

Then I would realise that there was nothing wrong with our telephone, and I would dial again, ten times, a hundred times.

Finally, one evening, I could bear it no longer.

When my husband came home, I said:

"I can't stand this any more. I'm going to sort everything out this week and go to Tehran!"

My husband, thinking he could not have heard me correctly, said:

"Where are you going?"

"Tehran. I don't know what has happened to my poor mother and father. If you're not thinking about your parents, I am!"

He was silent for a few moments, then, exasperated and at a loss, said:

"Do you understand what you're saying? At this very moment, when disaster could rain down from the sky upon people there at any second and no one's life is safe, you want to go to Tehran?"

"Yes," I said. "When else should I go? When everyone has been killed? I simply don't understand what sort of people we are. Our country is being destroyed. The enemy has killed everyone, old and young, women and men, while we sit here comfortably getting on with our own lives!"

At that last sentence, my husband finally lost his temper and, almost shouting, said:

"So now I understand what living comfortably means! I taught for twenty years. I had the satisfaction of believing that I was teaching the young generation of that country what responsibility and human freedom meant. I tried to make them understand that if they wanted to hold their heads high, they had to open their eyes and see clearly. They had to think, reason, and only then act.

“I thought that despite all the repression, because I belonged to no faction or group, I would be able to live quietly. But it wasn’t to be. Then I realised that if I didn’t act quickly, that filthy flood would carry me away with it too.

“I told myself I would retire early and at least save my family. So we came here. I have forgotten myself; I have forgotten my past. For years now I have worked myself to exhaustion like a day labourer, and what has come of it? You are always ill, always depressed, always worried. And even now, in circumstances like these, you reproach all of us for sitting here comfortably!”

I cut him off sharply and said:

“So apparently it is my fault that I have become ill here. That I have developed pains in my bones, stomach pains and a thousand other ailments for which there is no cure. You are so unfair! During all those years when there was no war, when was I ever anxious and depressed? When you speak with such selfishness, in my eyes you become just like your father, like my father, like all those Iranian men who see no one but themselves and, what is more, see themselves at the centre of the universe!”

My husband said angrily:

“I honestly don’t understand what you mean. You have an extraordinary way of judging everyone by your own measure. I’m selfish?! I’m the one who sees himself at the centre of the universe, or are you?

“You’re the one who thinks that only you have feelings, only you have understanding, only you understand suffering. Everyone else is made of stone...

“Damn this life! Why should you go at all? I’ll go myself. I’ll go straight to the front. To hell with it if I get killed too.

“No. We’ll all go. If I go alone, the rest of you won’t be able to manage here without an income. And what use will the children’s education be to them anyway? Yes, we’ll all go. Soheil and I will go to the front; you and Soussan will go behind the lines. People aren’t born to live. They’re born to fight and die!”

He fell silent for a moment to catch his breath, then began shouting again:

“I’m tired of it all. I’ve been suffering for years. You make me suffer. If only you made me suffer without suffering yourself!

“How hard I’ve tried to show you the way through reason and logic. I kept thinking that one day, eventually, you would see it for yourself. But no, I can’t go on like this any longer, suffering because you suffer.

“No. We have to go.

“If I remind you of my father, your father and all the cruelties of male domination, then you no longer seem like yourself to me. You no longer seem like the Firoozeh I knew, the woman I fell in love with, and whom I no longer recognise.

“I thought you were someone who was not content merely with having a high level of education; someone who truly saw clearly and acted accordingly. But now I don’t recognise you any more. Perhaps you don’t even recognise yourself.”

He had been shouting without stopping. Never, until that day, had I seen him in such a state.

My daughter and son sat there, frightened and anxious, in silence, looking back and forth between me and their father, helplessly wondering what to do.

Fortunately, at that very moment, the telephone rang.

My daughter picked up the receiver. I heard her say:

“Miss Betty, is that you? Oh, I’m so glad you called. I’ll get my mother right away.”

When I took the receiver and had exchanged greetings with Miss Betty, she said:

“First of all, tell me, are you all well? Your voice sounds unusual, and for the past week, every time I’ve tried to telephone, your line has been engaged.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I’ve been trying constantly to telephone Tehran. In the end, I still couldn’t get through. The telephone connection has been cut off. But I telephoned you as well. No one answered.”

Miss Betty replied:

“I wasn’t at home. I had been back in hospital for a week. I was telephoning you from there.”

Worried, I asked:

“Why were you in hospital? What happened?”

She replied:

“It was nothing serious. I had developed a hernia at the site of my operation. I’m better now and I’ve come home. But tell me about yourself. Why doesn’t your voice sound as it usually does?”

“We are all physically well. Don’t worry. But none of us is in good spirits, and I am very tired. I’m sorry, though, that you were back in hospital. Did you have another operation?”

She said:

“Not in that sense. The hernia was very superficial. It was only a minor operation. Don’t concern yourself with that now. I shall be expecting you tomorrow morning. Come and we’ll talk, and I’ll find out why you’re so tired.”

I said:

“Miss Betty, thank you for inviting me, but I really don’t feel up to it. Please don’t expect me.”

She replied:

“I’m not having any of that. If you don’t come, I’ll have the cheek to come looking for you myself. What time would suit you? Well?”

I said:

“No, I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble. In that case, I’ll come to you myself at about eight tomorrow morning.”

That night none of us ate any dinner. Early the next morning, my husband left without breakfast and without saying goodbye. The children went off to school and university, and I, tired, sorrowful and more anxious than ever, went to Miss Betty’s house and told her everything.

Throughout the time I was talking, she remained silent and listened carefully. When I had finished, she looked directly into my eyes with those same penetrating eyes of hers and continued to say nothing.

From the expression in her eyes, I sensed that she did not agree with my views and seemed to be waiting to hear something more reasonable from me. But I felt like a defendant standing before a jury, waiting to hear the final verdict.

When she finally spoke, and I realised that she was not going to take my side simply to spare my feelings, I said:

“Miss Betty, you are the only person I have in this country who can ease my loneliness here, even a little. Please don’t let me lose you as well because of what you are saying.”

Then my head sank between my shoulders and I burst into uncontrollable tears.

After some time, when I had finished crying, I raised my head and saw that Miss Betty’s face was deeply troubled. Once again, I could see that same tension in her face that I had noticed so often before, as though some terrible pain within her were tormenting her.

She was still silent.

I could bear it no longer and said softly:

“Miss Betty, what is it? Are you in pain? Please talk to me.”

Miss Betty replied:

“There’s nothing wrong with me. What can I say? I’m remembering the war years. The Second World War.

“Those years when, day and night, whatever you heard, whatever you read, was slogans. Propaganda. Everywhere there was talk of the enemy. Not only in Britain, not only in Germany, not only in Europe, but throughout the world.

“With slogans and propaganda, they encouraged young people to go to the front and destroy the enemy. Wipe them out. And young people have no experience. They have no judgement. They are easily influenced. They become excited. They act. And the result was that they all went to the front intending to destroy the enemy, and once there, they killed and destroyed one another. Do you understand what I mean?”

A little confused, I said:

“To be honest, no. I haven’t quite understood. After all, Miss Betty, you know better than I do what monstrous criminals the Nazis were. There was no alternative. They had to be defeated, didn’t they?”

She replied:

“I am not defending the Nazis. I can understand why you haven’t grasped what I really mean. In those years, I looked at everything much as you do now. I too was under the influence of it all. It wasn’t that I didn’t suffer. I did. I was against it too. But it all came from instinct and emotion, not from any real awareness.

“I remember that throughout those years of war, whenever my husband went to the front, we went through an ordeal. For days before he left, I would cry. I kept begging him, saying, ‘I don’t want you to go. I don’t want to lose you.’

“And he would reply:

“‘My dear Betty, you must accept that, firstly, we are no different from anyone else, and secondly, my duty is even greater than theirs. After all, I’m an army major. How can I not go to the front and fight in defence of my country?’

“In those days, his reasoning seemed very convincing to me. Faced with his courage and self-sacrifice, I felt ashamed, and I persuaded myself that there were ideals in this world greater than human life itself. And every day I died a little and came back to life, until eventually he returned from the front.

“Then one day my son came to me as well and announced that he wanted to volunteer for the front. I almost lost my mind. He had only just turned seventeen.[1] No matter how often I told him that at his age it was not his duty to fight and that he should be concentrating on his studies, I couldn’t make him understand. He wouldn’t listen.

“He too had his own reasons and his own logic. He said that other boys, even some younger than he was, had gone to the front for the sake of their country.

“When I realised that I could not persuade him on my own, I secretly begged his father to intervene and make him understand. But he did nothing. Instead of talking to Charles, he began talking to me. And with such pride!

“In the end, they both went to the front. It was 1944, a year when the war was raging across northern Europe. Day and night, at any hour, we had to be alert for the air-raid sirens and rush to the shelters. It was a year of relentless bombardment, shortages, hunger, sickness, death and slaughter.

“That was the year they left. They were fighting on the coast of France. They fought and fought, and eventually, in the famous battle known as D-Day, the Allied forces, our forces, were victorious and liberated Europe.

“It was June, late spring. But what sort of spring was that? We had not had a spring for five years. We lived in such fear and dread that we could no longer even hear the birds.”

I interrupted her and said:

“Miss Betty, after all, it was the sacrifice of people like your husband and son that led to the defeat of the Nazis. Wasn’t it?”

She said:

“The very day my son announced that he had to go to the front and fight for his country, I told him that I did not disagree with what he was saying. I believed in love of one’s country too. But I did not want him, at his age, to be killed or to kill someone else.

“I pleaded with him. I talked and talked. It was useless. He didn’t understand. In the midst of all that propaganda and excitement, he could understand nothing except what they wanted him to understand. His father did not understand either. They went.

“After D-Day, my husband came back, but there was no news of my son. I knew he had been killed. I could tell from the sorrow in David’s eyes. But for some time, he wouldn’t tell me the truth. He kept saying that Charles was in a field hospital with the other wounded men and that within a few days they would all be brought to London. And they were.”

She fell silent for a moment, then sighed and continued:

“Yes, they brought them back. But they brought back their bodies.

“Don’t ask me what I was like during those months, because the truth is, I can hardly remember how I got through them, or how I managed to stay alive.

“All I remember is that all the love I had for my husband turned, all at once, into hatred. I did not even attend Charles’s funeral. I did not go there to receive my son’s medal and deceive myself into believing that he was a national hero. I was ashamed.

“Nothing could deceive me any longer. No propaganda, no slogans, no arguments had any effect on me. What honour? What hero? Honour in killing and being killed?! No, really, think about it. What difference is there between playing the hero and killing someone? How absurd! The only difference between that and ordinary killing is that at the front, in wartime, you have legal permission to kill.”

She paused again, then said:

“I don’t know. Perhaps I didn’t go because I wanted to deceive myself. If I had gone, it would have meant accepting that he was dead. Accepting that I no longer had Charles. And I didn’t want that. No. I didn’t want to accept it.

“What days and nights those were. I was numb. I didn’t understand what was happening to me. For long periods, I would suffer from spells of memory loss. I didn’t recognise people or even understand the ordinary relationships between them.

“And even when I came to myself, I couldn’t bear David, or myself, or any of the mothers and fathers in the world. I felt as though David and I had killed every young person in the world!

“Tell me this: if life followed a different law from the one it does now; if every mother and father taught their child that killing, in itself, is a sin, and that by killing one person they are, in fact, destroying all of existence, would movements such as Nazism and Fascism ever have come into being?”

The way she reasoned left me with nothing to say. Her words bewildered me. I sat silently opposite her, not even daring to look at her dear yet so angry face.

And she continued:

“My life changed because I changed. No matter how hard David tried during those first few months to put our life and our relationship back together again, it was no use. Something had broken inside me when Charles was killed, and there was nothing anyone could do about it.

“I was so angry that after a while David no longer dared to speak to me. Poor Mary suffered terribly through all of this too, because she grieved for me and for David. She was with me whenever she could be and tried not to leave me alone. Sometimes, fearful of how I might react, she would talk to me about David and how much he was suffering. She would say that David’s grief was even greater than mine, because he had lost both his son and my love. But her words had no effect on me.

“After two or three months, when I began to recover from that state of near-madness, I decided I needed to find some work to occupy me. The only work I thought might bring me some comfort was nursing. So I went and became a volunteer nurse.

“The war in Europe had ended, but our soldiers were still fighting the enemy in the Far East, in Burma and New Guinea, and the hospitals were full of wounded servicemen. I became a nurse so that I could care for them. I wanted to ease their pain and, as far as I could, keep death away from them.

“I worked day and night. Sometimes weeks would pass without my going home from the hospital. That was how I fought my own grief, and death itself, until finally, in September 1945, the war came to an end altogether.

“And the world was left with ruins, mourning for the dead, those disabled by the war, mental illness, despair, widespread disillusionment and a loss of faith in everything.

“But don’t believe that we, the Allies, were entirely innocent and blameless. No, we too were responsible for more than enough appalling acts. It is simply that in war, the so-called victorious side gets to write the history, and naturally gives as much publicity as possible to the crimes of the defeated side.

“For all our claims to love culture and humanity, we razed the German city of Dresden to the ground. For at least two centuries, its music, art, architecture, extraordinary museums and beauty had been a source of pride to Europe. And in two nights of bombing, we killed twenty-one thousand[2] ordinary people in that city. Ordinary people. Women and children, old and young!”

Once again, I thought of the scenes from the Iran-Iraq war and the victims of the chemical bombs, and I said:

“Miss Betty, I understand what you mean, because at this very moment, while I am sitting here, the same sort of thing is happening in my own country.”

Her answer was very brief:

“I know all about it.”

Then she continued:

“A month or two before the war finally ended, Mary received a telegram from her mother in Australia saying that her father was very unwell and that she should come to Australia.

“Her parents had moved permanently to Australia several years earlier and settled there. In fact, quite a few members of David’s family on his father’s side had emigrated to Australia.

“Poor Mary came to me in tears when she received her mother’s telegram and said:

“‘My dear Betty, you know how I feel. On the one hand, I don’t want to leave you and David here alone. On the other, I know that if I don’t see my father, I will never forgive myself. For God’s sake, take care of yourself. Be kind to yourself. Be kind to David. You are the only person in the whole world who can ease David’s grief. You can make him the happiest man in the world again.’

“I replied:

“‘Mary, I could only do that when I myself was the happiest woman in the world, and you know that I’m not any more.’

“And so, anxious and worried, she had no choice but to leave, and I was left more alone than ever with my anger and hatred.

“About two weeks after Mary left, one morning at breakfast I saw that David had placed a note beside my plate. Without saying anything or even looking at him, I left the note there unread and went to the hospital.

“For the next week, night after night, I could hear him sobbing in the next room until morning, and I couldn’t sleep. But I showed no reaction at all. I had turned to stone. Whenever I was at home, David tried to speak to me, but I always managed to avoid giving him the chance.

“Then a letter arrived from Mary in Australia. Her father had died, and she could not possibly leave her mother alone and return to England. In the same letter, she wrote that perhaps things had worked out for the best, because David had written to tell her that he had been posted to Australia. That meant that before long David and I would be going to Australia too, and that was her one consolation.

“Perhaps the new surroundings and having her close by would help us bear our grief more easily.

“It was only after reading Mary’s letter that I realised David had spent that entire week trying to tell me about his posting and his move to Australia.

“But even that had no effect on me and made no difference to the way I behaved towards David. Years later, whenever I remembered those days, I would be astonished at my own behaviour.

“I had become known at the hospital as the kindest and most compassionate nurse, yet I still cannot understand how, in my own home, under the same roof, I could fail to hear the cries of my husband’s wounded soul.

“I was so absorbed in myself and in my work that nothing else could draw my attention.

“So when David finally found an opportunity to speak to me about Australia, I told him that although I was very worried about Mary, I couldn’t leave my work as quickly as he wanted and go to Australia with him.

“And so he had no choice but to go without me, believing that I would follow him shortly afterwards.

“When he left, just as something in me had begun to soften, I went straight back to where I had started, with the same hatred and anger. I simply couldn’t believe that David could leave me alone and go.

“From the day he left, he wrote to me every day, and each time I returned his letter to the address on the envelope without opening it. My only contact with him was through Mary. Her letters came regularly, and in every one she begged me to have mercy on myself and on David, to give up all this stubbornness and go to him.

“When she saw that I was paying no attention to her pleas, she wrote to tell me that for some time she had been worried about David’s physical and mental health. Because she had believed that I would be going to Australia and that everything would be resolved, she had said nothing about it in her earlier letters. But now she no longer felt she could remain silent and keep the truth from me.

“She wrote that for some time David had been seeking refuge in drink and had, in fact, become an alcoholic. If I didn’t go to him, there would be no hope of saving him, and it would not be long before we lost him altogether.

“Only then did I come to my senses and realise that if I lost David, if he died, my grief would be greater than ever. I realised that I couldn’t live without him. I realised that, in truth, I had never hated him at all, and that all those terrible reactions during that year and those few months had come only from the intensity of my love for him.

“Then I felt lighter.

“I made up my mind. I resigned from my job and wrote David a short letter telling him that I was arranging to sell the house and its contents so that I could join him as soon as possible.

“But I had realised what I needed to do far too late. Yes, far too late. In the midst of all this, a letter arrived from Mary, and from it I understood that it was too late. I had lost him after all.

“Can you believe that, at that very moment, time stopped for me?”

Faced with her grief, I had nothing to say. And in truth, knowing so little of her past, any comment I might make or any attempt to console her seemed foolish. I lowered my head and remained silent.

After a few moments, Miss Betty rose from her chair, but not with her usual lightness and agility. She seemed almost as though her back had been broken; she could barely keep herself on her feet. I felt that she could hardly walk.

I got up, rushed over to her, took her by the arm and said:

“Miss Betty, wherever you want to go, please let me come with you. In fact, why don’t you sit back down and let me make us both some coffee? The coffee you made earlier has gone cold.”

Miss Betty said:

“Please do. But first I want to go up to my bedroom and bring you one of Mary’s letters so that you can read it for yourself. Since you’re going to the trouble, we’ll go upstairs together and come back down. Then you can make the coffee.”

Her voice was trembling. There was no longer any trace of her usual vitality or that clear, youthful ring in her voice.

I helped her, and together we went upstairs to her bedroom. She pulled open one of the drawers in the cabinet beside her bed and took out a large folder. When she opened it, I saw that it contained many letters, all carefully arranged in order.

She went through them, took one out, closed the folder and put it back in its place. Then she handed me the letter and said:

“Here you are. Read it for yourself.”

I read the letter slowly and with great care. As far as I can remember, it went approximately like this:

Sydney

10 June 1946

“My dearest Betty,

“You must be wondering why, unlike all the other times, I have taken so long to talk to you. As far as my troubled mind can tell, it has been three weeks. No, a century, since I last spoke to you. Only God knows what that century has been like for me.

“And God knows that every moment of it I have been with you and talked to you, but I haven’t had the courage to put any of it down on paper. Every moment of this century I have wished for death.

“At last, today, I told myself I had to talk to you.

“Do you remember how, ever since we were children, I always told you everything? Do you remember that whenever anything happened, you were the first person I told? Do you remember how I shared all my hopes, my dreams and my sorrows with you?

“And although we were almost the same age, it was always you, with that strength of spirit of yours, who was my refuge. You knew me better than I knew myself, and you always believed in me.

“So now, my dearest, before I tell you what is causing me so much pain, let me ask you, in the name of our true friendship, to believe in me once again, just as you always have.

“You know very well that for almost two years I have suffered because of the suffering that you and David have endured. And it is because of that very suffering that today this strange calamity has come crashing down upon you, David and me.

“In my last letter I told you that David’s condition, both mentally and physically, was dangerous.

“My misfortune is that you didn’t arrive in time. During one of those terrible nights of drunkenness and agitation, he desperately needed you. He was calling for you. He was crying out your name.

“I could bear it no longer, and in your place I became his refuge. And he accepted me as though I were you.

“And the result is that today I am pregnant!

“Oh, I know it seems impossible to believe. I know how devastating it is. What am I to do? I don’t know.

“For now, my only hope in life is that, as you always have, you will continue to believe in the integrity of David’s character and mine, and that not even for a moment will you believe, in that pure heart and noble spirit of yours, that there was any betrayal.

“No. I swear to you by the purity of love and the sincerity of our friendship: he was not with me. He was with you. And never, not even for a moment, had it crossed my mind that I might be with him in that way.

“Perhaps, in the whole world, you are the only person who will understand what I mean. No one else would believe it.

“Tell me what I should do. I am waiting for your reply.

“If you want me to, if you tell me to end this pregnancy, I will do so without hesitation, and David will never know anything about what has happened.

“I only beg you to come soon. Please don’t be so stubborn.

“But if you want me to keep the baby, then you must know that this child is, in truth, your own.

“I am waiting for your letter, and for your shelter.

“Your friend for ever,

Mary”

[1] ***Minimum enlistment age:*** *Although the official minimum age for British Army overseas service in 1944 was eighteen and a half, underage enlistment did occur, including documented cases of seventeen-year-olds who served in the Normandy campaign.*

[2] ***The bombing of Dresden in February 1945*** *is now generally estimated to have killed around 25,000 people. The figure of 21,000 is retained here as it appears in the original novel.*

Chapter Eleven

Mary's letter came to an end, but I remained sitting there opposite Miss Betty, my head still lowered, holding the letter in my hand and saying nothing. Her letter, and the question of her pregnancy, had carried me back to the distant past.

I remembered being seven or eight years old. One afternoon, when I came home from school, I found my younger aunt, whom I loved dearly, at our house. As always, I ran happily towards her, expecting her to lift me off the ground so that I could throw my arms around her neck and kiss her plump, rosy cheeks.

But she hugged me without her usual enthusiasm. When I looked at her face, surprised and a little hurt, I saw that her large hazel eyes were swollen and red. With a lump in my throat, feeling sad, I slipped down from her arms and sat quietly in a corner.

My mother noticed that I was upset. She went into the kitchen and called me to come to her. When I did, she said:

"Firoozeh, your auntie has a very bad headache today. She isn't upset with you. Leave her alone. And don't sulk for no reason. Now go and get on with your schoolwork so that I can get on with my work."

That evening, when my father came home and we sat down to dinner, my mother said to me:

"Go quietly to your auntie's room and see whether she's awake. If she is, call her to come and have dinner with us."

I went in. She was lying down. I called her, but she did not answer. I realised that she was asleep and went back.

Then my mother began speaking quietly to my father and said:

"I hope that Gholamali Khan never knows a moment's happiness. What possessed the man to divorce such a lovely woman after five years, without even warning her, and have the divorce papers sent to the house? The poor thing said that from the moment the postman brought the divorce papers yesterday morning, she had been beside herself. Everything went black before her eyes; she turned round and collapsed. She stayed awake all night as well, but Gholamali Khan never came home.

"She said that if she didn't have you and me in this world, she would have killed herself. May God give him what he deserves."

My father said:

"My dear, don't curse the man for no reason. God knows, Gholamali Khan isn't a bad man! I know Nosrat is my sister and your friend, but I'm only telling you the truth. The poor man wants a child. What is he supposed to do? For five years he waited patiently, hoping she might have a child, but she didn't.

“He said, ‘Let me take another wife and have a child with her. You can stay in the house and remain the lady of the house.’ But she wouldn’t agree. So what did you expect the poor man to do? It isn’t his fault. It is Nosrat’s fault that she cannot have children.”

At this my mother said sharply:

“All right, all right. Please don’t start deciding who is to blame. How do you know that, if anyone is to blame, it isn’t him?”

My father replied:

“My dear, it is very rarely the husband who is to blame when a couple cannot have children!”

My mother said:

“Then what if, as Nosrat suggested, he had agreed to take in an abandoned child and they had brought the child up as their own? What would have been wrong with that?”

My father replied in a self-righteous tone:

“My dear, what are you talking about? An abandoned child can never really become your own.”

That night my parents argued for a long time, although they tried to keep their voices very low so that my aunt would not wake up. And I, not knowing whether my aunt or Gholamali Khan was to blame, had a lump in my throat and could not eat.

All I knew, in my childish way, was that something inside me told me my aunt could never be the one to blame.

Later, both that feeling of mine and my mother’s suspicion proved to be right. After divorcing my aunt, Gholamali Khan married two more women, but remained childless.

And my poor aunt, who had been only twenty-two when he divorced her, never married again. I never again saw that sparkle of happiness in her bright hazel eyes.

Ten years later, as my mother used to say, she wasted away from grief and died.

Chapter Twelve

I lifted my fixed gaze from Mary's letter, raised my head and handed it back to Miss Betty.

Miss Betty said:

"Why are you trembling like that? This is part of my life. You can see that I have accepted it. I accepted it nearly forty years ago. The morning this letter arrived, I was practically out of my mind for twenty-four hours. All that day and through the night until morning, I didn't rest, eat or sleep. I must have read the letter more than ten times, without exaggeration. Like someone on fire, I wandered frantically through the sitting room and from one room to another. Sometimes I was almost running. I didn't know what to do or where to seek refuge. I had no one left to talk to.

"My parents had moved to Cornwall in the south of England several years earlier and were keeping themselves occupied with gardening there. My brother, who had married after the war, had emigrated to America with his wife. The deep friendship Mary and I had shared since childhood meant that neither of us had ever felt the need to seek out other close friends. And because I was naturally reserved, I usually bore my troubles alone and rarely spoke about them.

"Yes, that day I paced those rooms until night fell. I walked and walked until, overcome with exhaustion, I broke down in tears. The telephone rang several times throughout the day, but I didn't answer it. My mind was completely taken up with what had happened.

"All the while I was talking to David and Mary in my head. I put them on trial. I cursed them. I condemned them. I told them they had deceived me all along, that they had betrayed me. David's posting had been a sham as well. He had deliberately asked to be sent there so that he could be near Mary. He had never loved me at all! His life with me had only been a cover for his relationship with Mary!

"I would never forgive them. Mary could do whatever she pleased. I hated them both. I even wished they would both die.

"I was utterly exhausted. I wished I had someone whose shoulder I could rest my head on and talk to. I spent the whole night like that.

"When dawn came, my head felt as heavy as a mountain. Somehow I got up and read Mary's last letter once more. Then I read all the letters she had written to me from Australia during that year. Every one of them was full of affection, full of sincerity. In all of them she had begged me to be kind to myself and to David.

"Our childhood memories came back to me. The First World War, the Second World War, all the hardships we had endured, her husband's death in an accident, Charles's death. It all came back to me.

"I searched through every memory I had of Mary, from the earliest to that very day, trying to find some sign of anything bad in her nature. I could find none.

“I remembered how, for an entire week, I had listened to David sobbing in his room and had done nothing. I remembered how, for a whole year, I had cold-heartedly returned his letters unopened.

“I began to cry again.

“Then I realised that I didn’t hate either of them. And I didn’t want that. I wished I could still feel the same anger towards David that I had felt before, and towards Mary too. I thought I could live more easily that way.

“I was trapped in a strange misery. Every fibre of my being longed for David. I had been making all my preparations to go to Australia with such eagerness. I couldn’t believe that once again my fate could change so bitterly.

“I wrestled with myself for a long time over what to do. In the end, I came to the conclusion that I could not agree to Mary having an abortion. To me, that too was a form of killing.

“I had to send telegrams to both her and David. I would tell Mary to keep the baby. And I would tell David not to wait for me, that I had made up my mind. There was no point in my going. I no longer cared for him. He should forget me and think about making a new life for himself. In fact, in his absence, I had already applied for a divorce.

“I wrote the telegrams. The moment the post office opened, I was its first customer. I sent them and went straight from there to see our solicitor. I placed my petition for divorce on his desk.

“The poor old man was so astonished by what I had done that for some time he simply stared at me, repeatedly shaking his head. He tried to reason with me and asked me why, but I told him there was no particular reason. I hadn’t cared for David for some time. We had already been living apart for a year because he was in Australia. I told him that during that year I had thought long and hard, hoping my feelings might change, but they hadn’t.

“I asked him to arrange the divorce as quickly as possible, because I had fallen in love with someone else.

“After nearly two hours of discussion, my solicitor finally agreed to begin the divorce proceedings immediately. Only then did I feel at ease.

“I went home and wrote two long, separate letters, one to Mary and one to David. I wrote at length about having fallen in love and about the plans I had for my future.

“In my letter to Mary, I urged her, now that fate had changed all our lives in this way, to marry David as soon as the divorce came through. I told her to look after him. To save him. And not to look at life with such bitterness.

“After writing the letters, I collapsed as though I were dead.

“A week later, I went back to the hospital where I had worked before and asked to return to my job. The hospital director, who had always been particularly fond of me, was delighted and immediately agreed.

“He said:

“‘I always knew you were a born nurse and that you could never leave your profession. I said exactly that the day you put your resignation on my desk. However much I asked you why you were leaving, you wouldn’t tell me. Even now I find it strange that someone with so much love and compassion could suddenly resign.

“‘I’ve telephoned your house several times over the past few days, but no one answered. Well, perhaps you were tired. Perhaps you needed a holiday. I don’t know. Whatever it was, it’s over now, and you’re here. That’s what matters. I’m very happy. It’s truly good to have you back!’

“I threw myself into my work again. I worked with such intensity that I was often commended, and that same year I was named Nurse of the Year. But when they wanted to publish my photograph and details about me in the newspapers, I refused.

“Alongside my nursing, I often took part in concerts, singing to raise money for charities and hospitals. The first time I appeared at the Town Hall in the role of *Madama Butterfly*, the reception I received was extraordinary.

“After the performance, when I came out of the dressing room to go home, I found a group of doctors, nurses and acquaintances waiting to congratulate me. I saw the hospital director there. He came towards me with another gentleman, about ten years younger than himself, and said:

“‘What can I say? It is extraordinary! How am I supposed to believe that Miss Betty, the nurse who devotes her days and nights to caring for patients, could also possess such a heavenly voice?’

“Then he introduced me to Dr Wright, the same doctor you saw at the hospital, my surgeon and physician. He described him as one of his closest friends and a truly honourable man. He had come to the concert at the hospital director’s invitation.

“That very evening, Dr Wright asked if I would have dinner with him at a restaurant the following night. I made an excuse and declined his invitation, but he was not discouraged.

“Two days later, as I was about to leave the hospital to go home, I saw him outside the hospital. Once again he asked if we could spend that evening together. Again I made an excuse and declined.

“This went on for about a month until one day I finally said to him:

“‘If you can accept that we are to be strictly just friends, then I won’t refuse your invitations.’

“He agreed, and after that, for nearly two years, I genuinely tried to make sure that his feelings for me went no further than ordinary friendship. To be fair to him, he was an honourable and trustworthy man. Of course, he still is. Later, when he married, both he and his wife became very close and dear friends of mine. His wife was a wonderful, quite exceptional woman. She died two years ago, and her death left me deeply saddened and unsettled for several months.

“The second time I took part in a concert and sang, one of my admirers, without my knowing, had alerted several journalists. After the performance they came looking for me, wanting to interview me. I turned them away.

“The following day, a representative from His Master’s Voice came to the hospital to offer me a recording contract. I turned him away too. When people from the radio came and asked me to work with them, I refused them as well.

“I had no desire for my name to be on everyone’s lips, or for there to be any lasting trace of me anywhere. From the very day I had, in effect, lost David, I wanted to disappear.

“I was afraid of being known, of being seen. If my singing caused a stir and something about me appeared in a newspaper even once, the journalists would never leave me alone. They would want to fill their newspaper pages by finding out about my private life, my interests, everything about me.

“And I didn’t want that. No. I never wanted David and Mary to be brought into it, or the story of our lives to become public. I didn’t want anyone passing judgement on my life or on theirs.

“All the anger, hatred, love and tears, whatever they were, belonged to us. They were nobody else’s concern.

“Well, keeping myself busy with work became my refuge. Behind a mask of cheerfulness and humour, I hid that other self, the sad and despondent one, and little by little that same cheerfulness became second nature to me.

“Letters from Mary began arriving regularly again, just as they had before, and in every one I could feel her warmth and sincerity. At the same time, I could see that she still hadn’t recovered from the blow fate had dealt her.

“The strange thing was that when I thought of her separately from David, my heart ached for her. But the moment I returned to reality, my compassion turned to anger, because I saw that it was she, not I, who was living beneath the same roof as David. She was the one fortunate enough to see him every day, to sit with him at the same table, to talk with him, or even to share those meaningful silences.

“It was she who had the privilege of looking after David, staying awake at night waiting for him, and sometimes, when the opportunity arose, taking his hands in hers, looking at his long fingers and beautifully shaped nails and perhaps, who knows, touching his body…

“Then I would be filled with hatred for her, and I would wish that lightning would strike and reduce Mary and me both to ashes.

“For years I lived with this conflict within me, but eventually time did its work. Gradually, the anger that used to come over me from time to time subsided, until today I can no longer find any trace of it anywhere within me.

“Now I’ll give you another of Mary’s letters to read.”

She pulled open another drawer in the cabinet beside her bed and took out another folder. She opened it and turned through the pages until she found the letter she wanted. Then she took it out and handed it to me.

15 March 1947

“My dearest Betty,

“Hello, my dear. At last, at two thirty-six yesterday morning, your little daughter was born. From the very moment she announced her arrival in the world with her cry, I was thinking of you. In my imagination I kept saying, ‘Betty, can you hear her? Can you hear your daughter’s voice?’

“In the six hours since she was born, I have only been able to see her once, and then only for half an hour. Already I can promise you that she is going to be a sweet and beautiful little girl.

“The doctors say that I had a very difficult labour and that I must rest for the time being.

“In all the letters I have written to you over these past few months, I have forgotten to tell you how completely I have lost myself in you. I have thought about you every moment, and about the smallest things connected with you: the way you walk, the way you sit, the way you look at people, the way you speak; the things you like; how you arrange your home; the writers you enjoy; how much you love Verdi and Bizet.

“I have thought about all these things so much that I can no longer find myself. There is no ‘me’ any more. I truly am you. I have become you. You are no longer far away from me. You flow through me. It is only when I look in the mirror and don’t see those two beautiful blue eyes of yours that I am suddenly taken aback.

“With you in mind, and because you have always loved Brontë, I am going to call her Charlotte.

“Love your daughter. I have nothing. Everything belongs to you. Remember that David, Charlotte and I will always adore you.

“I kiss you through my tears,

“Mary”

It was an extraordinary letter. It was considerably longer than the part I have repeated here. I remember how deeply it affected me, and when I handed it back to Miss Betty I said:

“I don’t know why, but this letter makes me think of Rumi and Shams of Tabriz. Do you know Shams and Rumi?”

She replied:

“Not in the way you do. I know that Rumi is a great poet and mystic of Persian literature, and that the Divan of Shams is one of his extraordinary works, though I find it difficult to

understand. I also remember that, later, when I was a young woman and then middle-aged, whenever my father had the opportunity, he would tell me something about that divine love found in the Divan of Shams."

Then, as though the weight of a mountain had been lifted from her heart, her face brightened and she gave me that same broad, generous smile of hers.

"Well, it seems I've talked far too much and tired you out. Aren't you hungry? By the way, what time is it?"

I looked at my watch.

"It's three in the afternoon."

In her ringing, playful voice, she replied:

"Well, well, well! So much for English hospitality! I really have put you through it. And to think you told me last night that you were exhausted! Heaven knows what I would have done to you if I hadn't thought you were tired. Come on, get up. Let's go downstairs and make ourselves a sandwich and some coffee and look after ourselves for a bit."

I did as I was told, and together we went downstairs.

After we had eaten our sandwiches and drunk our coffee, I looked at her and it seemed to me that, in those few hours alone, much of her strength had drained away. In recounting the suffering of her past to me, she had in fact relived it.

But, as always, with that same strength of spirit that was inherent in her nature, she had emerged from it, and outwardly at least I could no longer see any shadow of sorrow on her face.

So I plucked up the courage and said:

"Miss Betty, please tell me more. Tell me about Charlotte. I know how much you love her."

She then told me that after Charlotte was born, she felt she could no longer bear to live in that large house, with all its memories of her husband, Charles, Mary and her entire past.

She sold it and bought the comparatively small house in west London where she still lived. The money left over, which was quite a considerable sum, she put in the bank and opened a savings account in Charlotte's name.

She told me:

"Charlotte was an extraordinary child. From the age of three she began corresponding with me. She had learnt to write her name, and from then on, whenever Mary wrote to me, Charlotte would add her name at the end of the letter. Sometimes she would draw pictures too. She would draw a little girl with very large eyes and write 'Charlotte' beneath it.

“When Charlotte was five, Mary wrote to tell me that she and David had formally made me Charlotte’s godmother in a church ceremony, and that because Charlotte was constantly wishing she could see me, they wanted to send her to me for a month. Mary wrote down the flight number, the date and the exact time the plane would arrive at Heathrow.

“You cannot imagine what that news did to me. I was delighted and anxious at the same time. I was delighted because, for five years, in every letter I had read that Charlotte loved me and was always asking about me, and now I would finally be able to see this little admirer of mine and have her with me for a month. But I was worried too, because I truly had no idea what I was supposed to do with a five-year-old girl for an entire month. I kept wondering whether she might feel homesick or become bored.

“The first thing I did was take that month off work so that at least I would have nothing else to worry about and could devote every moment to her.

“At last the waiting came to an end. The night before she was due to arrive, I slept no more than two or three hours because of my excitement, anxiety and sense of responsibility. The next morning, I was at the airport three hours before the flight from Sydney was due to arrive.

“The plane landed exactly on time. After the usual formalities, the passengers began to emerge one by one. I was standing in front of everyone waiting, holding a large piece of card on which I had written ‘Charlotte’ in bold letters.

“As I anxiously and excitedly watched the passengers, I suddenly saw a little girl pull her hand free from the air hostess and run towards me.

“The joy of seeing that little bird fluttering towards me clutched at my heart and brought tears to my eyes. I picked her up and we covered each other with kisses. Then I asked her:

“‘How on earth did you know I was Aunt Betty?’

“She laughed and, with childish pride, said:

“‘Aunt Betty, did you forget that I can read and write? You wrote ‘Charlotte’ on that card you’re holding. And even if you hadn’t, I would still have known it was you, because I see your photograph every day. You look very much like Mummy.’

“When the air hostess caught up with us and handed me a small suitcase, she said:

“‘And here is Charlotte. I think it’s been a very long time since you’ve seen your daughter.’

“At that very moment I realised that all my worries had been unnecessary. How could I possibly have any difficulty with such a loving and intelligent child?

“As I looked at her, the sweetness of her gaze, the shape of her face and those large hazel eyes reminded me of Mary, while her long fingers and beautifully shaped nails brought David’s hands back to me.

“From that very moment, she found such a place in my heart that the month she spent with me became one of the happiest periods of my life.

“Every day of that month we had something planned. We went to the zoo, the cinema, restaurants, parks and several museums. Of them all, she liked the National Gallery best. Even at that young age, the pleasure she took in the paintings and the attention she gave them astonished me.

“We also spent a few days together at a hotel in Brighton. It was summer. Every day we went down to the beach, and whenever the weather was suitable we swam together and collected shells along the shore.

“On the day I was taking her back to London, when we boarded the train and settled into our seats, she suddenly took my hand in both of hers and said:

“‘Aunt Betty, I’m having a really nice time. I wish we could see each other more often. I wish you would come to Sydney too, and we could all live together.’

“I replied:

“‘There’s nothing I’d like more than to be with you all the time, but I can’t. I work here at the hospital. If I go away, my patients will have no one to look after them.’

“She said:

“‘Well, then come to Mummy’s hospital and look after her patients.’

“I said:

“‘Mummy’s patients want their own nurses. And if I’m not here, my patients will be sad and won’t get better.’

“At that, she fell silent, disappointed and thoughtful, and said very little to me for the rest of the journey to London.

“The following morning, at breakfast, she suddenly asked again:

“‘Aunt Betty, I know you have a beautiful voice. Mummy told me. Why don’t you sing something for me?’

“I said:

“‘The songs Mummy has told you about are opera. Even grown-ups don’t like them very much. But I promise that when you’re older, I’ll sing for you.’

“And she replied:

“‘I promise you too that when I grow up and become a good painter, I’ll paint your portrait.’

“And that is exactly what she did. That portrait you see there is one of the pieces she painted in her final year at secondary school.

“From then on, every summer or at Christmas, when Charlotte came to England, to London and to my little house, it seemed as though all the happiness in the world came with her, and my life came alive again.

“Even now, I get through each year looking forward to summer or Christmas and the arrival of her sons, Francis and William. I’m glad I’ve managed to stay alive this year too. I’m sure I’ll still be here in another month and a half when they arrive. After that, if I still have the cheek to go on living and don’t die, perhaps I’ll finally give in and, as that social worker of mine puts it, move into the ‘palace’. I’ve been thinking about it.

“Perhaps at times I may feel physically weak and unable to do very much, but I still don’t feel helpless. I know how I could occupy myself. There, I could sometimes organise concerts and singing programmes. At other times, I could study and read.

“You spoke about Rumi today. I have Nicholson’s translation too, and I’m going to take it with me. Perhaps, at this stage of my life, it wouldn’t be a bad thing to lose myself in his world as well. And after that... Well, whatever comes after that is no longer my concern. I won’t be responsible for it.”

She paused, then clapped her hands together and said:

“That’s all. A wave rises from the heart of the sea. For a moment it becomes a mirror of the sky and the sun, and a moment later it returns to the heart of the sea. And then it is as though a memory comes to someone and is forgotten. To me, that is the whole of life.”

Then she fell silent. Wanting to bring her out of that state of mind, I once again plucked up the courage and asked:

“Miss Betty, forgive my curiosity, but may I ask whether you ever saw Mary and David again?”

She looked at me intently and then, as though she had once again drifted far away from me, said:

“Yes, I did. Once. In all those years, I saw them only once more. That was twenty years after our divorce, when I was invited to Sydney for Charlotte’s wedding.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of missing her wedding, and Charlotte couldn’t accept the thought of my not being there. For months beforehand, she and Mary had been writing to tell me that they were waiting for me, that they had set aside a room for me in the house and that everything had been arranged.

“I had no choice. I had to go. So I went.

“When I arrived at Sydney Airport, I saw Charlotte and her fiancé, Tom, before anyone else. After Charlotte and I had embraced and kissed, and she had introduced me to her fiancé, I noticed David and Mary, both watching me eagerly.

“Mary still had a beautiful face. There was something about her that brought to mind the charm and allure of a sunny autumn day.

“But David had changed a great deal. His face had grown more mature and thoughtful, his hair had turned grey, and his tall figure had become slightly stooped.

“I embraced Mary, and we both burst into tears.

“But when I shook hands with David and our eyes met, my heart trembled again, just as it had in my youth, and for a moment I felt that I wanted my hand to remain in his for ever. Charlotte’s happy, excited voice brought me back to myself, and I returned to normal.

“When we reached the house, my suitcases were taken to my room and I rested for half an hour. We all had dinner together, and afterwards I spent the rest of the evening with Charlotte and Tom, hearing all about their wedding plans and honeymoon. I was enjoying being with Charlotte and her fiancé so much that I wasn’t even aware of how tired I was from the journey. Mary, however, was.

“So, in the middle of our conversation, she suddenly said to Charlotte and Tom:

“‘It’s half past midnight. Do you realise how many hours Aunt Betty has been without sleep? That’s enough now. After all the exhaustion of the journey and all that lost sleep, let her get some rest tonight. You can leave the rest of your talking until tomorrow.’

“Then she took me to my room. She closed the door behind her and, just as she used to when we were children, put her arms around me and said:

“‘My darling Betty, my dearest, you know how very happy you’ve made me by coming.’

“Then she burst into sobs and fell silent. For a while, we both cried in silence. Our silence expressed what we felt better than either of us could have put into words. There was no need to speak.

“The following day, Charlotte, Tom and Mary had arranged to go to the church to receive the necessary instructions from the priest for the wedding. They left after breakfast, and David and I were alone.

“He asked me about my work, about the friends I had in London, and about my brother and his family. I spoke of our parents, whom we had both lost several years earlier, and then I asked him about life in Australia. While he was talking, he suddenly broke off, got up and went over to the piano in the corner of the room. He sat down and began to play Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which he had always particularly loved.

“His fingers still moved over the piano keys with the same youthful skill. The music, with its extraordinary power, carried both of us beyond time and place and back into the past.

“When he played the final note of the symphony, he raised his head and fixed his gaze on my stunned face. It was then that I saw that his noble face was wet with tears.

“He seemed to come back to himself. He stood up.

“Startled, I said in alarm:

“‘What is it, David? Why?’

“And he said, almost shouting:

“‘That is the question I’ve wanted to ask you for twenty years! What happened, Betty? Why?’

“I said:

“‘Forget the past. Twenty years ago, in separate letters to you and Mary, I explained everything. I told you that I had truly fallen in love with another man. When I no longer loved you, when I was no longer in love with you, I didn’t want to betray either you or myself. That was why.’

“And he replied angrily:

“‘I don’t accept that. Mary has never believed it either, and even now, to her, you are still the same angel of her childhood dreams. But I have suffered for twenty years because I have never been able to understand why, after that short note you sent me saying that you were hurrying to get everything done so that you could come, you suddenly changed your mind, sent that telegram, and then wrote that wretched letter.

“‘I never believed it, and I don’t believe it now. This pain will remain with me until the last moment of my life.

“‘I did what you wanted. You wanted me to agree to the divorce, and I did, because I had no choice. You wanted me to marry Mary, who had always been nothing more to me than a kind relative and a good friend, and I did that too. But none of it was what I wanted.

“‘I did not live my own life.’

“I found myself in a terrible position. After twenty years, I realised that all my sacrifice and self-denial had not only been in vain, but had actually had the opposite effect.

“I had written that lie to them so that David would give up all thought of me, and so that Mary might have some peace and would not have to carry the burden of that unintended guilt with her for the rest of her life.

“Besides that, I had written to Mary that, to spare David’s pride, she must never tell him the circumstances in which Charlotte had been conceived, and that this secret must remain for ever between her and me.

“And now, after twenty years, I could see that once again I had found myself in a difficult position. After twenty years, the feelings between David and me had once again become extremely fragile and vulnerable. For a moment, the thought crossed my mind to tell him everything. To tell him about all my pain and sorrow, to tell him that I had loved him every moment of all those years, and how much I had suffered. But fortunately, I quickly came to my senses.

“I looked again at David’s slightly stooped figure and grey hair and remembered that we had both reached the threshold of old age. Then, in a dry, firm voice, I said:

“‘David, don’t you think we’re really too old for all this now? I, for one, no longer have the patience for this kind of childishness, and I can’t pretend to be young. As for your having suffered for twenty years trying to solve a mystery that still remains unsolved, I am truly sorry. Everything I wrote to you and Mary all those years ago was the absolute truth. Twenty years ago, I was still at an age when I could fall in love.’

“He cut me off sharply and said:

“‘If that’s so, if you really did fall in love, then why did that love never come to anything?’

“I had prepared an answer to that question in my mind long before, and I said:

“‘Because, on one of the short trips we took together to Austria, he fell in love at a ski resort with a tall Austrian girl with black hair and green eyes. Two months later, he married her. Well, I was sad for a while, but then I forgot him. You have no idea what a stunner that girl was. If she hadn’t been so beautiful, I think I would have died of grief. But when I looked at it fairly, I had to admit that he was quite right to fall in love with her.’

“And he said in exasperation:

“‘Please, Betty, please. Stop your story there. It’s making me sick.’

“And I said:

“‘You’re right. I’m sorry.’

“Then I began talking about Charlotte’s wedding, about her and her plans for the future, trying to draw him out of the past. By the time Mary, Charlotte and Tom returned from the church, fortunately his agitation had passed. Charlotte and Tom’s excitement and happiness overwhelmed all our other feelings, and thank God the ten days I spent there for their wedding passed without further trouble.

“But to tell you the truth, it wasn’t until I was sitting on the plane back to London that I was finally able to breathe freely. And it was then that I realised I could never again bear to see either David or Mary. David because, despite both of us growing old, I was still in love with him; and Mary because her quiet resignation constantly reminded me that she had become a victim of my life, and that she too had never really lived a life of her own.

“My poor, unfortunate Mary! Whenever I think of her, I cannot forgive myself, and I fall apart inside.”

After that, she said nothing more and remained silent. I sat there, astonished and speechless, staring at her dear, careworn face. Everything had been said. There were no mysteries left for me now.

I think several minutes passed before I could lift my head from beneath the weight of a life spanning seventy or eighty years.

When I came to myself, I went over to her and said with affection and respect:

“Miss Betty, please let me kiss your lovely face, for my own sake and in memory of my mother, and let me hold you in my arms.”

Chapter Thirteen

That evening, when I returned home from Miss Betty's house, my daughter and son opened the door to me, and my daughter said excitedly and happily:

"Mum! Mum! Wonderful news! The grandmothers called from Tehran just a few moments ago. They were both at Uncle Mohsen's house. Everyone in the family is safe and well. It's such a shame you weren't here."

And my son said:

"Dad called Miss Betty's house to give you the news, but you were already on your way home."

I took them both in my arms and kissed them, and together we went into the sitting room. A faint haze of sadness still lingered on my husband's face. I went over and sat beside him, rested my head on his shoulder and said:

"Could there be anywhere in the world safer than here?"

Then I closed my eyes and wished in my heart that a day might come when there would no longer be any trace of war or ignorance anywhere on this earth. But, knowing the reality of the world, a silent despair gripped my heart, and my tears fell silently and gently onto his shoulder.

Then my husband placed his hand on my head. I opened my eyes and, through the veil of my tears, saw the spark of joy in the eyes of my son and daughter, sitting opposite us.

Life, in all its miraculous wonder, settled within me, and I felt a responsibility to sustain its living force and preserve its warmth.

London, 6 July 1989