

Sample Translation (pp. 23-35)

## 33 Arches and a Teahouse

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That weekend I questioned my grandmother who was in Isfahan on a visit from Tehran.

“Grandma, who is the leader?”

“He’s an old, wise man who believes in God. I’ve told you about Mohammed, remember, the kind-hearted prophet,” said my grandmother.

“Yes, the one who shared his clothes and his dates with the poor,” I answered.

“Exactly. And our leader is a sort of grandson of his. That’s why he’s allowed to wear a black turban as well. He is a *sayyid*, a direct descendant of Mohammed, the founder of Islam.”

“Grandma, do the people in Shah-Square want the leader to become the new ruler of Iran?”

My grandmother laughed. “Yes, my little one. But it’s not as simple as that. The Shah hates him. That’s why he sent him away from Iran. Unfortunately the leader is a long way away. That’s why the people are in a rage. That’s why they’re roaring so loudly. But you don’t have to be frightened of them. They just want our leader to come back. Do you see?” she asked.

“And will the Shah and his family still be able to live in the palace when the leader becomes our new ruler and moves into the palace?”

My grandmother grew serious. “Khomeini has no wish to live in this palace. He doesn’t need any of that. And he won’t become Shah and he won’t wear a crown. He’ll keep his black turban.”

I admired that good, old man.

From then on, every day strange things happened outside. All day long people went out into the streets and at night they were on their roofs. Soon my family was standing on the roof almost every night, until long after it had grown dark. Everywhere around I could see people on the rooftops. All our neighbours and their children would stand on their roofs, all shouting the same slogans.

“This is a revolution, children,” my father said. “What you’re experiencing is something very unusual.” He laughed.

We children were joyful. We yelled the slogans as loudly as we could.

“Want a bet I can roar louder than the two of you together?” asked the elder of my two brothers.

I thought he was fantastic. He always had good ideas for games. When we were playing, it was always he who determined what we would play and what the rules would be. We younger siblings were glad that he had so many ideas. We never played the same game twice. He thought up something new every time, and for us it was a certainty that he would think of many more. This brother knew exactly what he wanted to do as a career. He wanted to be a chocolate manufacturer.

“When I’m running my own factory, I’ll go round it every day and eat as much chocolate as I like. And whenever a child has a birthday, I’ll send them a parcel of chocolate. There’ll be hundreds of parcels a day.”

I was glad my brother wanted to be a factory owner. Obviously he would let me have some of the chocolate. But secretly I also envied him his future career.

During the revolution this brother invented loads of great new games on the roof. We children laughed a lot and shouted slogans so loudly that we were hoarse the next day.

For me the revolution was like the time when my brothers had their summer holidays. The family did nice things together. Our father had time, and my big brothers didn't have to go to school, or simply did no homework. The best thing about the revolution, though, was that we children didn't go to bed until really late in the evenings. The revolution was fun.

During those months of revolution, the grown-ups would listen to a banned station of a British broadcaster, the BBC. The BBC transmissions promoted and directed the revolution. They gave instructions as to which city's people should protest and in what way.

One day the BBC called on all Isfahanis to drive their cars to one particular road junction in the city. My father, by this time a well-off and respected doctor, was immediately convinced by the idea and its effectiveness, and phoned home on the spot.

"Quick, get the children dressed! Load up with enough food and drink," he told my mother. "I'm shutting the practice now and picking you all up."

My mother was worried. "Has something happened? Where are we going? The children haven't finished their homework."

My father laughed. "Oh yes, I'll say. Something's happened, something wonderful. We're having the revolution today. Don't let's talk now - I'll pick you up right away."

That day we and our car took our places in an enormous traffic jam and spent several hours there. They were euphoric, joyful hours. The protest turned into a gigantic, forbidden people's fair. Every motorist made the effort to hoot out a tune on his car horn. And those without cars, who were standing around, beat drums and danced. Street sellers with their trays of wares round their necks went around between the vehicles. They tried to get us to buy chewing gum, handkerchiefs, water, shoelaces, hairbrushes, almonds and pistachios – everything possible and impossible, in short. One elderly man was even selling peacock feathers. The people in the cars were cheerful and happy to spend. They bought eagerly. Even the men cleaning windscreens were getting generous tips from the drivers. We children were amazed. A revolution like this one couldn't help but be fun for us. The grown-ups were visibly playing up and doing forbidden things. In this they all had a feeling of belonging together; they were fighting for a common cause. And there was a common enemy, one which we children were allowed to abuse and curse out loud: the Shah.

The next day I heard the grown-ups talking.

"It's madness, the traffic jam yesterday led to total gridlock. We've won," my father told my mother.

"What difference does it make to the Shah that there was a jam in Isfahan?"

“Think about it. Public order completely broke down yesterday. It said on the radio that the police were powerless. A lot of people didn’t go to work. And the traders were really cheated off because consignments of important goods couldn’t get in or out of Isfahan. A lot of businesses in the Bazaar didn’t get their deliveries. Imagine! The losses the *bazaaris* have made! It’s as if somebody’s heart stops beating for fractions of a second and their legs don’t belong to them for a moment. The *bazaaris* are up in arms. If they no longer support the Shah, he’s had it. He’ll have no chance. Another few losses on their part and they’ll be sending him into exile in a way he won’t forget! No one wants to tangle with the *bazaaris*. That idea with the transport standstill was brilliant!”

One evening the telephone rang. My father answered. I had also rushed to the phone as for a while now every phone call had meant fresh news. I pressed my ear to the receiver to hear who was calling. It was one of my father’s friends. He was very excited.

“Quick, go outside and look up at the sky. He’s in the full moon.”

My father didn’t understand. “Who, for heaven’s sake? Who’s in the full moon?”

“Don’t you get it? Him! Our religious leader. God’s representative on earth.”

My father simply laid the receiver down on the table and called us all together. He had already opened the door to the terrace and, head high, eyes shining, was looking up into the sky. His face was radiant. “Quick, everyone up on the roof!” he called. “The leader’s in the moon.”

Everyone ran to the roof. Each of us children wanted to be first. We jostled one another out of the way, squabbling.

“Me first! I want to see him,” I begged my younger brother and thumped him on the legs.

“I want to see him too. Don’t push like that,” he answered. I was much stronger than him, after all.

“Stop fighting, children, or I’ll send you to bed,” said my mother.

I had to be patient. We got up there eventually. And there he was! A black silhouette of his profile with the long beard and turban in the gleaming full moon. His hands were even folded in prayer.

“I can see him!” I cried. I was very excited and looked at my older brother. He was just gazing at the sky, smiling.

“I can’t see him. Where is he then?” my younger brother asked.

“What are you all looking at? Where’s he supposed to be?”

“Sssh, be quiet,” one of the adults told him.

I realised then how silent it was on the roof in the dark. More and more neighbours climbed up on to their roofs. They were talking in low voices, enraptured. Some were astounded, others prayed. No one was yelling. The moon had never seemed bigger or more magical to me, the starry sky never more perfect.

“A miracle has happened,” my father said.

After that the Shah left Iran, choosing exile. The beloved leader was brought back from Paris to Tehran by aeroplane. The Iranians rejoiced, celebrated, prayed. My greatest wish had been fulfilled.

The joy at the Shah’s departure did not last long, however. Nothing got better. Quite the opposite. Everything people had criticised under the Shah grew even worse. Many more people lost their jobs and livelihood. The Shah’s prisons were not closed down. New ones were built. Often the same people who had fought for freedom in the Shah’s day were put back in prison. And all the time the new leader brought in new rules which were supposedly based on the rules in the Moslems’ Holy Scripture, the Koran.

A short time later my aunt burst into our house in the middle of the day. I was at home. My aunt’s face was red and I could see she had been crying.

My mother ran to her and asked, “What’s happened? What’s wrong, for goodness’ sake?”

My aunt was unable to speak. She sat down on a chair.

“Quick, get a glass of water!” my mother commanded me.

I ran into the kitchen and fetched the glass. I was keen to do everything properly as I would soon be a school child. I had only to wait until the summer. Then I’d finally be able to go to school.

When I came back, my aunt had already begun explaining what had happened.

“They just took her away,” I heard my aunt say.

“But why, what did she do?” asked my mother. She was visibly upset.

“The others said that her veil had slipped and then the Guardians appeared from nowhere and ordered her to fix her chador,” said my aunt.

“Those Guardians! They’re sick. They get enjoyment from spreading fear and alarm. They’re all frustrated women from the countryside who haven’t managed to get a husband. And now they are somebody and can do whatever they like.”

My mother was getting worked up.

“What have things come to? What’s happened to our beautiful country? Just imagine, they slapped the poor girl several times because apparently she gave them a cheeky answer. Her nose was bleeding. Then they pulled her into their car and drove off. They’ve kidnapped her,” she said, and began crying again.

“Oh God, I hope she comes back alive. I’ve heard of several kidnappings already. Mrs Fahimy’s husband is still not back. And it’s eight weeks since he was taken. No one knows where he is. They won’t tell his wife anything,” my mother said.

“I set out as soon as Mrs Golban came to me. She was in bits, and couldn’t leave the baby on its own. I went to the Guardians’ post for our neighbourhood. And you know, they laughed in

my face. They said it had nothing to do with me. Even if her mother came in person, they wouldn't tell her anything. Everyone would get his just punishment. I tried to give them money but they sent me away. Poor Mrs Golban. How will she get through this?"

Then it became clear who they were talking about. It was the daughter of my aunt's neighbour. Siba was a super girl. I liked her a lot. Whenever we were visiting my aunt and I got bored, I went to see Siba. She was already a young woman. She was a sportswoman and would always tell me the craziest stories. I was even allowed to stay with her when she had friends over. She was like a big sister to me. I was dreadfully shocked and ran to my room. I had already heard a lot about the leader's new Guardians, the *pasdaran*. I often suffered from nightmares in which they were pursuing me and I was running for my life.

The *pasdaran* had nothing to do with the police and nor were they soldiers. They were a second militia and instead of fighting the enemy outside their borders they fought the enemy within the country. Their task was to control and subjugate, as it was called, their own people for the protection of the Islamic Revolution. Even the police were afraid of them.

The *pasdaran* were everywhere! They went around in fours and appeared as if from nowhere. Like crocodiles which lurk unseen beneath the surface of the water and then, once near enough to their victims, suddenly snap their deadly jaws shut. There were male and female *pasdaran*. The males arrested men and the females took women away. The male patrols wore comfortable combat trousers and shirts, had long unkempt beards and were armed.

The women wore long black chadors. A chador is like a bed sheet which women throw over their heads. It reaches to the ground and encases the whole woman from head to toe. Women hold the chador in front of their face with one hand from the inside, or else secure it with a safety pin so that it stays in place by itself. The devout women, or those who do not wish to attract attention, hold the chador so tightly closed in front of their faces that only the tip of their nose and one eye are visible from the outside. They were walking black tents with an exposed nose tip and two feet.

The *pasdaran* sat in a jeep on which were the small letters 4WD, Four Wheel Drive. These Guardians soon had a nickname. People called them Four *Welgarde Daayus*, four underhand layabouts. For the Guardians were often people who took pleasure in ordering others around, humiliating and tormenting them. They were people who before the revolution had had no say and had been ridiculed or treated with contempt by their fellows. People who had only gone to a sporting event to rampage afterwards, or people who were always looking for trouble and fought with everyone. Now they were paid by the state to do this. I knew all this from the grown-ups. I was dreadfully afraid of the *pasdaran*.

I was extremely worried about Siba and told my brothers everything when they came home from school. In the evening, too, all the family's conversations revolved round Siba. They kept her at the Guardians' post for two days and beat her. They didn't give her anything to eat. On the third day they blindfolded her, as they had at the kidnapping, and drove her all over the city. At some point they just threw Siba out of the car. Some shopkeepers looked after her and contacted her parents by phone. Siba didn't know where she had been and didn't want to say what they had done to her. She was in a state of shock and didn't laugh again for a long time. Soon everyone in the cities knew someone who had been taken away by the

Guardians. Even us children. People lived in constant fear and did their utmost to observe the many prohibitions as far as possible.

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