



Excerpt from

Asal Dardan's
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Asal Dardan, *Reflections of a Barbarian*

Spitzweg

What I have, I don't want to lose, but
Where I am, I don't want to stay, but
Those I love, I don't want to leave, but
Those I know, I don't want to see anymore, but
Where I live, I don't want to die, but
Where I die, I don't want to go:
I want to stay where I have never been.

Thomas Brasch

My flight is a story, not an experience. I was there, I studied the faces of my parents, the faces of the other passengers and the border guards. I probably slept a lot and babbled and cried a bit, taking notice of this and that. My parents had to flee the country where I was born with one suitcase and a one-year-old child, leaving behind everything that they could have been as a family. Like our house, the one I could have grown up in, and the language that would have shaped me. Nearly, almost. Instead what remains with me are fragments, handed down: my parents' car, stopped on the way to the hospital by the throng of protesters, even though a woman in labor sat inside. My parents' chauffeur, who examined me a few hours after I was born and put my little foot in his mouth, so that one day, later on, he could tell me about it. My father, who lost his composure and nearly dropped me, because I wouldn't stop crying while my parents hid with me in our house from the demonstrators outside. The celebrated steps that I took on my first birthday in a blue and white kilt that my aunt had sent from Aberdeen.

My own memory begins at some point in our apartment in the high-rises of the Höhenberg neighborhood in Cologne. I am sitting alone at the kitchen table, eating chicken soup and waiting for Santa Claus. I already have a feeling that my father is the one putting the presents under the tree, but I figure that he must have an arrangement with Santa. I want to behave like a model child. The angels are watching me, and one even flies over my mother's head and through the doorway while she kneels to clean the linoleum floor. "She's always cleaning, your mother," my father says. "But she doesn't understand that she's just spreading the poison around that way." I believed everything he said, because he knew everything.

When I think back to the time in that apartment, my mother is almost invisible, because my father fills up every corner of my memory. My mother's scaffolding held everything together, but it was my father's extra frills that I admired. He taught me how to ride a bike and how to play chess; he let me sit on his lap for hours while he recited Persian poetry or explained the world to me. He treated me like a small friend whose company he treasured. Today I think that I was his only friend, and that makes me very sad. Yet, nothing about this time seemed strange or suggested that one day it would suddenly end. Fundamentally I had an idyllic childhood, even if the high-rises of Höhenberg aren't the typical backdrop. But I didn't reflect much on my life; I *was*, and merely being able to exist comes very close to an ideal. When you don't notice them, tight spaces can be rather cozy, especially when you're a child. I had the same pink wallpaper with white dots as Ernie on *Sesame Street*, and I thought it was exciting to toss the garbage bags down the chute and jump back into the creaking elevator. Everything was in its place, and my own place was in the center of it all. It only became apparent much later that I was missing the material and symbolic points of reference to locate myself and my parents in this world. In the meantime my parents, and with them some parts of myself, had slipped away from me. You get used to thinking that life is like a net, and something has to get caught in it. You can't reach for the rest, because otherwise the stitches rip open and then everything is gone.

Since my parents were barely able to bring anything from Iran, we started off with very little anyhow. There were no family photos and no heirlooms in our apartment, no old books, no objects collected over the years, no souvenirs or things that you just don't throw away, even though they have no use anymore. There were no memories there, except for one that I had made myself when I drew a smiling egg-head on our new brown leather sofa with a correction pen. We didn't have guests often, but whenever we did have someone over, there was always the story of how Asal immortalized a face on the sofa on the very same day it was delivered. I was proud of this story, even though back then I was still trying to be a good daughter.

On our walls hung several prints by Carl Spitzweg: *The Cactus Lover*, *The Everlasting Bridegroom*, *The Bookworm*. I don't know how they got there, but I liked them for their tranquility and innocence. What you saw is what you got. Well-mannered people moved through lovely scenes colored in earthy tones, people who were in the exact place they belonged and still managed to escape their surroundings. I took a special liking to *The Cactus Lover*. He knew what to do, what clothes he had to wear, how he should move, and how he wanted to spend his time. He was what he was. An old gentleman with his pipe, standing in total peace in the garden amid all his flower pots, inspecting a single red cactus blossom.

Back then, I didn't know that I couldn't find Spitzweg's pretty houses and streets in my own city, because they had been destroyed by bombs in the intervening years. As a child I naturally knew nothing of Spitzweg's sardonic criticism of those stodgy Biedermeier days, and I had no idea that he was one of Hitler's favorite painters. Spitzweg's pictures are indeed occasionally humorous, but even the humor is utterly vanilla, which is why it doesn't surprise me that Hitler, ever the provincial kitschaholic, liked the straightforward landscapes and the bourgeois scenes untouched by modern life. The absurdity of Nazism, of course, is that it celebrated what it at the same time destroyed, because it intended to recreate everything better and purer. Yet what it created is lifeless and fake, and even what was saved can only be seen through a brown haze, as if Hitler had etched his name into everything that came before him.

Like the pictures that hung in our apartment, the ones that sparked my child's imagination because I was an excellent little *petite bourgeoise*. I longed for houses with big yards and garages and staircases that I could sit on to tie my shoelaces, while my pet – a dog or a cat – crept around me. Along the mansion-lined streets in Bensberg where my friends from school would later live, it looked exactly as I had dreamed of sitting in front of those pictures in my apartment in Cologne. In a certain sense my friends lived in a new Biedermeier age. Their families owned their own homes, sometimes even going back a generation or two; their grandparents lived within walking distance and had gone to the same school as their

grandchildren. They would never consider moving. Some of the mothers did silk painting or organized weekly Scrabble nights in their solariums. My friends' older siblings were really cool, because they had hobbies and listened to loud music in their rooms, covered all over in posters and disorder. Take Susanne's sister, who drew anarchy and peace symbols on her hands and arms and was often rude to her parents. I admired her for the way she would sometimes say "*whatever*" in a hiss when she went out. But I admired her mother even more – she never let it affect her, and she seemed to continue loving her daughter just as before. "In our culture you don't behave like that," were the words that brought everything crashing down at home whenever I talked back. It always became more than an argument, since it seemed to strike at the very foundation of our family and sometimes left aftershocks in its wake for days. It brought me great suffering. I wanted to understand what was so wrong with me. I didn't know what exactly this said culture was and why it was different at Susanne's house. If the culture that seemed to be responsible for me didn't approve of what I felt, then why did I have it at all?

Sometimes I hoped that I could have Susanne's life later on; I was waiting in some sense for my West German childhood. I felt protected, that wasn't the problem. But the life of my classmates appeared to have been rubber-stamped by some official authority, an authority that it seemed to me I had been smuggled past. I couldn't see the cracks in those families' lives, just like I couldn't see any in the Spitzweg paintings. And I also couldn't see the cracks in our own life, because they were invisible. I assumed that what was broken had to be above all something inside me, because everything around me seemed to work. Now and then a sense of the invisible crept into our apartment, whenever my parents listened to Iranian music, especially the pop music from the time before the revolution. It was the music that my parents had listened to before their exile: in the car on their way to the market, in restaurants and bars, while doing housework or meeting with friends and family. The songs mixed mainstream pop from the West with an Iranian sound, and they were banned by the Islamic leadership after the revolution, sending them into an exile of their own. They split time itself in two; the old time, left frozen and unchanging, continued existing alongside the time that our family lived in. For

my parents these pop songs were a door to that parallel time, to the land that was gone, and to the people, scents, and routines that they missed. Its context was unfamiliar, but the music planted a strange longing in me, a longing for something that wasn't mine, but could have been. I sometimes wonder if I would have been more *me* in Iran. I have no idea who that person would have been, but the question points to a yearning for unbrokenness and intimacy. Yet I felt like a stranger in my parents' life, the only life that I knew. The injuries that you inflict – and sometimes even want to inflict – on loved ones are unavoidable. But through my dependence on my parents and their love for me, I forced them to simulate a normalcy that must have hurt them. What could be normal about having to completely reinvent yourself overnight?

They almost never spoke about Iran and their life before they fled, but the music brought their homeland into our apartment. I even owe my name to one of these songs. It opens with the moving words, "I come from the City of Love," as if a messenger was singing from afar. To me it seemed like the song was about the city where I was born, a city made of legends. In my imagination the streets of Tehran were packed with colorful cars, while people standing on street corners complained about the loud honking and led lively conversations. They cracked open roasted pumpkin seeds with their teeth and spit the shells on the ground. Old men sat around, weaving baskets or peeling oranges and pomegranates. Women plucked parsley leaves off the stems, mothers wrapped sheep cheese or dates into flatbread and stuffed the food into the mouths of their playing children. Off in the distance lay endless fields, full of red poppies and wild kittens. All of the people had eyes and hair and noses just like mine, and work was done only out of a certain zest for life. The music accompanying my imagination included, as always, the big stars of 1970s Iranian pop: Googoosh, Ebi, and Dariush. The homeland that existed in my mind was completely different from what I saw in the Spitzweg paintings; it was urban, dirty, loud, and chaotic. A little like Cologne, just without our feeling of having fallen off the face of the Earth.

I can say with certainty that my visions of Iran were shaped by the videotapes that our relatives in California sent us from Tehrangeles, as the neighborhood is called where so many Iranians living in exile shop, eat, and stick together. On the cassettes were recordings of old performances by Googoosh, who I counted as one of the most beautiful women in the world alongside Whitney Houston and Farah Diba. They also featured Ebi and Dariush, who were bearded men with almond-shaped eyes, just like my father, men who were suffering profoundly and looked incredibly handsome doing so. Sometimes I lumped Dariush together with Jesus, presumably because both of them represented a vulnerable masculinity, each man pitting himself alone against the world. But in reality Dariush was probably more like James Dean, a fact that didn't escape the attention of the clerics, who took it upon themselves after the revolution to ban everything that was subversive to the Islamic-Iranian culture. That also meant that women in the Islamic Republic could not make public appearances, especially not as solo singers. Their voices were to remain unheard, their bodies unseen. But music reaches across borders. Somewhere a note can be played and heard, even in the most remote corners. The world stays alive through its sounds, as long as it finds a listener, like a little girl in Cologne.

In a wistful song that I often listened to as a child, Googoosh sings, "So go, but no matter where you are, no matter where in the world, one day I will find you and look you in the eyes." I knew that she meant the song for me, that I had turned my back on her and yet she was still looking for me. To bring me back, back to myself.

The lyrics to those songs were sometimes puzzling, but the feelings they conveyed suffused every part of me. I'm coming to you, come to me, I'm waiting for you, why aren't you waiting for me, where are you waiting, I'll find you, are you thinking of me, I'm thinking of you, my heart is speaking, my heart is breaking, I love you, do you love me, help me, you, only you. I fantasized myself into the songs, which were about romantic love yet covered an entire country. It was an ideal country, the place where my parents had had everything and had been everything. Their lives were going exactly as they had hoped, until they were no longer going

at all, because they found themselves in a high-rise apartment in a foreign country. Nobody there knew of them or waited for them. As if a giant hand had grabbed them by the back and flung them right across the globe. You can survive a shock like that, but not without getting hurt. Could the people who spout their views about displacement and migration on talk shows and in op-eds, people who haven't ever experienced it themselves, just stop for a minute? Could they think about what a radical break it is to be shut off from the new world imposed upon you, while you still can't comprehend that now you really have to leave the old world behind?

At home no thought was given to what the old world – the world that my parents and I longed for for different reasons – was like for the people who weren't like my father, who weren't in the service of the Shah or worked against him in their thoughts and actions. I grew up with the conviction that the Pahlavis were infallible and dignified, even in the face of the bitter insult of being overthrown. I venerated them, their sorrow inscribed itself in me, and I even thought that I would be able to avenge them someday when I was older. Only much later did I understand that for other people Googoosh's voice was no symbol of an ideal past; after all, she had sung for the Shah and his family in the Niavaran Palace on a number of occasions. It surprises me how much I resisted this insight, even long after I realized that the Shah of my childhood was a fairy-tale character. Maybe the loss of my illusions about my parents' home is the reason why I ultimately have not two homes, but no home at all. That's the strange thing about living between multiple worlds: instead of real places, it offers you almost-places, built from fantasies and longings. Places where you want to stay, even if you have never been there.