

**Journeys in kitchens: Travel writing and the possibilities of
new encounters with women, food and domestic life in
Islamic cultures**

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Statement of Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature

QUT Verified Signature

June, 2019

Thesis Statement

This thesis explores the hypothesis that there might be something of value and cultural nuance in domestic narratives and the view of domestic female space as a form of travel writing. The exegesis examines the works of Freya Stark (1893-1993) and Ella Maillart (1903-1997) side by side, and considers where their work might be placed in the overall body of travel literature about the East, and travel literature written by women. It also examines how their portrayals of the East offered an alternate perspective to that written by men and examines their influence on my own creative work, “The Kitchen of Joy”. The creative component of this thesis comprises the first two sections of a novel-length work of creative non-fiction. The first section of 25,000 words is included as part of the examinable creative component of this thesis, while the second section, also of 25,000 words, is included as an appendix.

Keywords: travel literature, travel writing, travel writers, female travel writers, literary studies, gender, women, women travellers, Freya Stark, Ella Maillart, Orientalism, Muslim women, kitchens, culinary literature, domestic spaces, homes

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Exegesis

Journeys in kitchens: Travel writing and the possibilities of new encounters with women, food and domestic life in Islamic cultures

1. Introduction

As a rule, I don't condone the theft of library books. But it was a stolen book that led me, in a roundabout way, to this research question: namely, what is the nature of writing about domestic encounters and domestic spaces used by female travel writers, and how does this work suggest the possibility of an alternative relationship between the author, the observer, and the subject, the observed? I had been reading a mountain of works by male travel writers from the early twentieth century. In those travel narratives, the writer often referred to the travels or writings of those who had gone before him, invariably another man. These writers cross-referenced one another's work—Newby referred to Fleming, who mentioned Lawrence, who referred to Twain, and so on. I loved all of them, with their swagger and misadventures. But after a time they began to sound similar, their narratives missing an element that I could not put my finger on. It made me wonder if there was a different approach to explore in travel writing, particularly in the way travel writers represent domestic spaces.

On my shelves I found a forgotten work of travel writing, a long overdue library book belonging to the Brisbane City Council Library. The book was *Turkestan Solo* by the little-known Swiss writer Ella Maillart. I had no recollection of borrowing it, which probably explained why it had never been returned. It read as fresh and compelling, despite having been written in 1934. Maillart wrote with a different viewpoint from her male counterparts, with an independent set of interests and focus. As I will discuss in more detail below, as a woman she was outside the recognized body of Swiss literature of the time, and as a Swiss writer she lay well outside the mainstream of travel writing.

At the same time, I became absorbed with the work of the English travel writer Freya Stark. I read Stark's travel writing while researching for a trip to Iran I hoped to make for the creative component of this thesis. In particular, I became interested in *The Valleys of the Assassins*, published in the same year as *Turkestan Solo*, as it detailed an area I planned to visit, and Stark's writing shared a similarly fresh perspective on domestic spaces and the women she met on her travels.

In contrast to their male counterparts, who often wrote as explorers, cartographers, merchants or archeologists, in the writings of these two women, in *The Valleys of the Assassins* (Stark, 1934) and *Turkestan Solo* (Maillart, 1934), I discovered an alternate emphasis, a focus on people and relationships, everyday life and domestic detail, particularly as it related to other women. These two female writers had access to spaces that were off-limits to men, like harems, bath houses and kitchens. This allowed them to observe rich ethnographic details unavailable to male travel writers, and produce a body of work notable for its attention to everyday life and everyday women. As such, these works offered a different perspective on the places and peoples they encountered, one which has much to add to travel literature in terms of point of view and the nature of the relationship between the observer and the other.

I had long felt there was something of interest to be gained as a travel writer by focusing on domestic spaces and interiors. I myself had begun spending time in kitchens around the world and noticing the contrast between the relationships I established with women in their own kitchens, which tended to have an easy intimacy, and those encounters with women in public spaces, which were more formal. The kitchen door was like a secret back door into the intimate life of another, with the resulting tension between interior and exterior, both physical and personal. The stiffness and formality of the women's public, exterior lives often gave way to a closeness and familiarity inside the kitchen. These travels and writings became the kernel of an idea about what might be gained by immersing myself more fully in the foreign and yet entirely familiar environment of a woman's kitchen.

In this project, I am testing the hypothesis that there might be something of value and cultural nuance in domestic narratives and the view of domestic female space as a form of travel writing. The exegesis examines the works of Freya Stark (1893-1993) and Ella Maillart (1903-1997) side by side, and considers where their work might be placed in the overall body of travel literature about the East, and travel literature written by women. It also examines how their portrayals of the East offered an alternate perspective to that written by men and examines their influence on my own creative work, "The Kitchen of Joy". From this examination, I hope to contribute to the discourse around our representations of those we write about, and how travel writing that emphasises the domestic space, namely the kitchen, can act

as an entry point into a broader commentary about culture. Specifically, I hope to demonstrate how the creative writing techniques of point of view and close description reveal the potential for a different kind of relationship between the writer and subject, one in which there is, as described by Barbara Cooke, an interplay between the two, rather than simply “observer and observed” (Cooke, 2015, p. 60).

2. Key Terms

In this exegesis, I have used a number of terms which are well-established in literary studies. The definitions below are offered for clarity in their usage here.

Travel Writing

I adopt the definition of travel writing used by academic Carl Thompson, as “an encounter between self and other that is brought about by movement through space...at some level a record or product of this encounter, and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entailed.” (Thompson, 2011, p. p.10)

Ethnography

Rubiés defines ethnography as “The description of peoples, their nature, customs, religion, forms of government and language.” (Rubiés, 2002, p. 242) As it applies to travel literature, ethnography is an indispensable component of travel writing, yet travel writing is not purely ethnographic, also having elements of the personal, geographic and political.

Domestic Ethnography

Originally a term used by filmmakers to describe filmmaking with family relations at its core, domestic ethnography is defined as “the documentation of family members or, less literally, of people with whom the maker has maintained long-standing everyday relations and has thus achieved a level of casual intimacy.” (Renov, 1999, p. 141) Renov believed film makers used this technique as a vehicle for self-knowledge through portrayal of the familial other, with resultant “complexity and the interpenetration of subject/object identities”.

The term has become utilized by travel writing academics to include a type of ethnographic writing centred around the domestic space (Melman, 1995) where there is a familiarity between subject and author, between observer and observed.

Culinary Literature

As Kristen Abbey notes, culinary literature is a term she has coined to describe “literary genres which use food and recipes” (Abbey, 2006, p. 1). More specifically,

culinary literature places food in its cultural context, and offers possibilities of trans-cultural experience.

Women's Travel Writing

I have used the term women's travel writing to denote works by female authors. Although this is not a uniform body of work it is useful for the purposes of this thesis to consider it in isolation from works of travel literature written by men.

The East

As defined by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*, existing dogma supposed the world to be divided into two very unequal halves, the "rational, developed, humane and superior" West, and the "aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior" Orient or East (Said, 1978, p. 300). It is important to note the use of the term East in this thesis is similar to that used in Said's work to describe the Orient, including East Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East.

3. Methodology

There are two principal research methods used to develop the argument presented in this exegesis. Firstly, I have undertaken extensive field research that has contributed to the creative component of this exegesis. This forms a basis for critical reflections on my practice as a female travel writer who is representing domestic spaces in the Islamic world. Secondly, by undertaking close textual analysis, with its attendant focus on style and point of view, I have formed a way of relating the discussion of my creative practice to influential earlier female travel writers.

3.1 Field Research Methodology

The creative component of this exegesis, “The Kitchen of Joy”, was completed following field research during which I spent periods of time with two women in their homes and kitchens: Meryem Henim in Kashgar, China, and Azar Ahmadi in Shiraz, Iran. Ethics approval was granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committee for the field research to be conducted (Ethics Approval Number 1500000983). Please note that the political situation in both western China and Iran has changed considerably since the field research was conducted, and as a result all names, including those above, have been changed for protection of those depicted.

Practice-led research like this has a basis that is both ethnographic and auto-ethnographic in nature. The principles of ethnography are “so embedded in travel writing...that one assumes ethnography to be essential to the genre” (Rubiés, 2002, p. 242). Although borrowed from sociologists and anthropologists, ethnography would, with its descriptive framework and personal engagement with the subject, appear to be ideally suited to the type of in-depth case-study research I aimed to explore.

As a way of gaining an understanding of the domestic lives of these women, their personal stories, and their food, I conducted interviews and informal discussions in and around the kitchen, spending one week each in the kitchens of the two research subjects. In addition, I also interviewed their families and friends. The research began each day with a discussion of meals planned, and ingredients needed, and was followed by extensive food preparation and conversation. This included in-depth

discussions of recipes, techniques and methods, as well as food celebrations and festivals. I was initially a kitchen observer, taking notes and asking questions, but over the course of each research period I also became an active kitchen participant, assisting with the cooking of dishes and gaining a deeper understanding of recipes, and of the women I spent time with, through the practice of cooking. This was best suited to the kind of research I was conducting as a way of getting to know the research subjects in more depth as we cooked and conversed together.

In this way, I hoped that by spending time in intimate domestic spaces it might be possible for rich narrative threads to emerge and take shape as the creative component of this project, correlating closely with a desire to explore my own personal experiences as a traveller and writer and set this self-reflection in the wider context of cultural and social meanings of the domestic. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz used the term “*thick description*” (Geertz, 1973, p. 9) to describe, “not a single view of the experience, but a large enough number of testimonies that a great variety in detail is obtained.” Geertz emphasised the interpretation of field notes into ethnographic text as being of primary importance, but cautioned understanding the bias inherent in any anthropologic observer’s point of view. In addition, it is essential for me as a writer to recognise the potential for unequal power relationships when interviewing subjects. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued, travellers enter a space of negotiated intercultural contact which ultimately serves to create the “domestic subject” through the purported “discovery” of the spaces of the exotic, but in this way the traveller in fact explicates her own society and subject position (1992, p. 3). As oral historian and researcher Daphne Patai writes, “The possibility of exploitation is built into every research project that requires human beings as sources of information.” (1987, p. 5)

Feminist anthropologists and sociologists such as Parr and Iacovetta were extensively influenced by Geertz, pointing out the inherent and culturally-derived bias in ethnographic fieldwork and writing (Iacovetta, 1992; Parr, 1990). Issues of representation arise in this kind of ethnographic research, and as a writer it is important for me to note my own biases and develop an awareness of these issues.

3.2 Textual Analysis Methodology

The objective of my textual analysis in this case was to consider the work of two female travel writers, Ella Maillart and Freya Stark, whose focus was the East. By close reading I would attempt to understand the devices used by these authors in representing their subjects, and their meaning within the text. I also wanted to examine the broader meaning of these devices as it related to my own work.

Any discussion of representation in travel writing must include reference to Edward Said's seminal theoretical work, *Orientalism*. Said changed the discourse on the ways in which the West portrays the East in art, literature and culture, arguing that the East was represented in a stereotypical way that is now regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude. Said attested that one of the fundamental difficulties when the West writes about the East is how little these writings are based on actual lived experience (Said, 1978). Yet much of travel writing concerns direct lived experience, and as a travel writer I have a responsibility in terms of textual approaches to portrayal of the other. As Said has stated, his intention was never to prevent writing about the other (Said, 2016), but to develop an understanding and awareness of the framework of cultural and historic bias at play.

Orientalism has, however, in many ways failed to take into account the distinct, plural and gendered differences in approaches to the Orient. Billie Melman, who theorized a post-colonial feminist interpretation of Said's work, argues that the Orient has been considered a traditionally male space, where "the imperialist experience and tradition are presented as androcentric." (Melman, 1995, p. 5), Said's failure to address the complexity of the relationship between gender and imperialism has since been explored by a movement in feminist criticism that has, as post-colonial historian Reina Lewis observes, highlighted the "paradigmatically male, colonial subject articulated in Said's *Orientalism*" (Lewis, 1995). Lewis argues that women's relationship to Orientalism and imperialism could be other than simply supportive of, or oppositional to the male players, but could in fact be contradictory to their approach (Lewis, 1995, p. 237).

Feminism is of crucial interest to post-colonial discourse for two major reasons. Firstly, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects. Secondly, there have been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factor in women's lives (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007).

As Bassnett and Melman argue, women travel writers offer multiple perspectives from diverse points of view, not simply one based on gender or otherness. "Once the gaze of the traveller reflected the singularity of the dominant culture; today, the gaze is more likely to be multi-focal, reflecting the demise of a world-view that separated *us* from *them*" (Bassnett, 2002, p. 240). I have also drawn on the work of Luce Irigaray, whose approach to feminist criticism emphasized the writing effect of the text itself rather than the gender of the writer (Irigaray, 1985), looking at the "otherness" of women and its "disruptive enactment in language" (Brooker, 2017, p. 137). In the textual analysis below I use Irigaray's theory of close reading as a way of understanding representative techniques and point of view, and the passages I've chosen in this textual analysis emphasise a very particular point of view and the actual lived experience of the people met by the writers, rather than a fantasy of the Orient.

As a practitioner, these two approaches—Orientalism and post-colonial feminism—have informed my textual analysis of the works of Stark and Maillart. I approach these works recognising the immense role played by women travel writers in modifying the binary perspective.

4. Literature Review

When a western woman is writing about the East, she joins an area of travel writing that has tended to marginalize women's voices but has also marginalized the East. This has created a complex binary which characterises the literature in this area as either Colonialist and/or masculine in nature, or non-Colonialist and/or feminine in nature. In this literature review, I wish to examine the roots of that binary, and move towards the possibility of a different and more nuanced point of view of the East, one in which a binary approach is seen as too simplistic. A major criticism of Orientalism, as previously mentioned, is that its constructs fail to recognise a heterogeneity of voices, including those of women. By exploring the literature in this area we can see the development of this more nuanced approach, from the recognition of women's travel writing as a separate body of work, the specific work of women travel writers who wrote about the East, and the development of feminist critique to *Orientalism*.

4.1 The History of Women Travel Writers in the East

The contribution of women to the existing canon of travel literature is relatively recent and still largely overlooked. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, at a time when independent travel was called "exploration" and was conducted mostly by men, women's voices have been largely absent. Yet, more recently, feminist literary histories have made progress in reclaiming "lost" texts by women travel writers, and there has been a surge in academic interest in the history of women travel writers (Bassnett, 2002; Borella, 2006; Lewis, 1995; Melman, 1995).

The earliest preserved works of travel writing by a woman in English are the *Turkish Embassy Letters* of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), who travelled to Istanbul in 1717-18 as wife of the then Turkish ambassador, Edward Wortley Montagu. Described as "the genre's earliest and most influential exemplar" (Hulme & Youngs, 2002; Melman, 1995, p. 111), Lady Mary's work is significant, in part, because it challenged the prevailing ways in which the East was written about by men (Grundy, 2001; J. Hall, Sagal, & Zold, 2017; Heffernan, 2012).

In direct contradiction to the eroticized descriptions of her male contemporaries (Said, 1978), Lady Mary's accounts stood apart. As a woman she had privileged access to female-only spaces including homes, harems and bath houses, and wrote of these spaces with a veracity and candour that was unmatched. As Melman describes, "*Letters* became a blueprint for the travel writing which integrated movement across open spaces with detailed accounts of domestic and largely feminine spaces." (Hulme & Youngs, 2002, p. 111)

A century-long period of inactivity in women's travel writing followed the publication of *Turkish Embassy Letters*, with a resurgence in the late nineteenth century marked by writers such as Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904) a Swiss explorer and writer who travelled to Algeria disguised as an Islamic man. Strongly anti-colonial, Eberhardt's approach was notably different from that of her male counterparts, in that she was more likely to question some of the dominant colonialist ideologies prevalent in travel writing of the time (Chilcoat, 2004). Alexandra David-Néel, (1868-1969) the first Western woman to enter Tibet, and Dr Elizabeth Ross (1878-1915), working as a physician for a protracted period amongst the Bakhtiari tribes of Persia, are women travel writers who posed a considerable challenge to the existing colonialist paradigm by completely immersing themselves in their environments and presenting an insider's point of view. Ross's posthumously published and neglected memoir *A Lady Doctor in Bakhtiari Land* (1921), for example, directly challenges prevailing orientalist tropes and interrupts or even reverses existing power dynamics, with Ross positioned as a woman and outsider, but also a doctor with a privileged position amongst both men and women of the tribe (Cooke, 2015). Her writing offers a nuanced and detailed ethnographic viewpoint of a modernizing and progressive tribe that differs considerably from the romanticized versions of the Orient as immutable and unchanging.

The rise in popularity of travel writing in Victorian times, often seen as travel writing's peak (Hulme & Youngs, 2002; Thompson, 2011) led to an increasing number of works about the East by women travel writers. The works are remarkable for their diversity. Hester Stanhope, (1776-1839) is widely credited with conducting the first archeological exploration in Palestine, using a secret copy of an Italian manuscript she had acquired (Amoia & Knapp, 2005). Isabella Bird (1831-1904)

was a naturalist and explorer who became the first woman to be elected Fellow to the Royal Geographic Society following her extensive travels in Asia, Persia and India. Her writings were seen as both “radical and conservative” for their anticipation of post-colonial critique whilst still resorting to Victorian travel stereotypes (Williams & Clark, 2017, p. 1). Emily Hahn (1905-1997) wrote candidly about her years in Shanghai from 1935-41 where, amongst other experiences, she learned to smoke opium and became the lover of Shanghai poet Shao Xunmei (Hahn, 1944). Gertrude Bell, the only woman mentioned in *Orientalism*, was a writer, linguist, and later political advisor to the British Government. Bell’s extensive travels through Persia later led to her becoming “the most powerful woman in the British Empire after World War I” (Amoia & Knapp, 2005, p. 147) as Oriental Secretary to the British High Commissioner in Baghdad. She became a formative force in the Arab world, as one of the architects of modern-day Iraq. What these four writers represented was an alternative way of viewing the Orient, either through their direct lived experience or unique perspective, that contradicted or challenged existing masculine colonialist portrayals.

Freya Stark (1893-1993), English writer, explorer, archeologist and ethnographer, became the first European woman to explore the Alamut Valley in Luristan, in modern day Iran. A feature of Stark’s extensive travel writings in Persia, Syria and Yemen include a constant challenge to and subversion of masculine authority and Orientalist assumptions (Karsh & Miller, 2004; Ruthven, 2006). For some women, Stark included, travel offered a way of reconfiguring themselves, “assuming different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home.” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 234)

Stark’s contemporary, Ella Maillart, (1903-1997) was a Swiss adventurer and writer and has been under-recognised for her contribution to women’s travel writing. Her most well-regarded works, *Turkestan Solo* (1934), *Forbidden Journey* (1937), and *The Cruel Way* (1947) are rich with domestic detail about the women she encounters and the spaces they inhabit in Turkestan, China and Afghanistan. In *Forbidden Journey*, a journey from Peking overland to India, we have the opportunity to compare and contrast a female and male perspective side-by-side, as both Maillart and her accidental travelling companion, the English writer Peter Fleming, wrote

accounts. As noted, “the books read like different trips...Hers is clear-sighted and down to earth; his is often facetious.” (Theroux, 2000) Maillart offered a more complex perspective on the work and lives of those she wrote of, one that countered what modern critics would consider Fleming’s imperialist and orientalist viewpoints (Forsdick, 2009; Maureen, 2008).

Although popular in their day, many of these published works fell into obscurity until feminism’s second wave in the 1960s and 1970s, when forgotten texts were rediscovered, many re-published by UK feminist publishing house Virago (Bassnett, 2002). In recent decades, there has been renewed interest in travel writing by women as a body of literature with its own weight and significance (Bassnett, 2002; Hulme & Youngs, 2002; Thompson, 2011). We see works that concentrate as much on the inner as the outer journey, for example, Elizabeth Gilbert’s commercially successful *Eat, Pray, Love* (Gilbert, 2006) which has received criticism for deviating from the path of more conventional (read masculine) travel narratives and for continuing a post-colonial and orientalist attitude towards India, Indonesia and the East as a commodified spiritual destination (Lane, 2012).

The literature review above has brought us to a point in travel writing about the East where we now understand representation of the other to be complex, but also to a point where we understand that some of this complexity has come about because of the writing of women, who have had a unique approach and point of view. In the following sections I wish to consider this approach and point of view in more depth.

4.2 The Reception of Women’s Travel Writing

As defined above, women’s travel writing as a literary genre can be unified by its emphasis on authentic personal experience, often sitting within an historical, geopolitical or ethnographic framework. For female travel writers, however, the authentic personal experience has differed significantly from that of male travellers. Many women have written about their experiences “in full knowledge of the absence of a tradition into which they could insert themselves with any degree of comfort or familiarity” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 231). Lady Mary’s *Turkish Embassy Letters*, for example, was heavily criticized, even ridiculed at the time of publication by Montagu’s friends, including Alexander Pope and Horace Walpole. (Heffernan,

2012). But, once published after her death in 1763, the work became a classic of travel writing, demonstrating that a less binary view of the East could exist and challenge existing points of view.

Women's travel writing was often poorly received with a "pattern of prejudice" that saw their works viewed as frivolous, or overlooked entirely (Thompson, 2011). Female travel writers were often viewed as eccentrics or "'emergency men' operating within a male tradition, imitating men's ideas and behavior" (Melman, 1995, p. 5). Relegating women to the role of eccentrics or pretend men emphasized how different they were from more socially conformist women, and allowed an assumption that women travellers were somehow abnormal or were escaping the constraints of family or society.

Women were thought to write differently too. In contrast to the male travel writer, in many works by women travel writers we discover a "clear assertion of femininity, either through attention to details of clothing, accounts of domestic life, or the inclusion of romantic episodes." (Bassnett, 2002, p. 239) Female travel writers collected a wealth of details of the worlds in which they moved, worlds which were unavailable to male travellers, or of little interest to them. As Melman explains, "Ethnographic material on eating and food, costume and hygiene, as well as folklore, were collected, then translated into a descriptive narrative which was used as a code in the larger discourse on manners and morals, gender and the private and the public." (Melman, 1995, p. 311) These were areas in which women could claim authority, partly because they were less frequently commented on by men, but also because women had privileged access to spaces that were unavailable to men (Thompson, 2011). This close observation of the life of women in other cultures perhaps brought on a re-evaluation, by Western women, of their own position as individuals *and* as a marginalised group in a patriarchal culture. (Melman, 1995).

Yet writing about what were considered specifically *feminine* subjects didn't always sit comfortably even with the writers themselves, who often had an apologist stance for their focus on intimate domestic spaces, women and food, all considered feminine topics.

Others compensated for this discomfort with a “tendency...to belittle the significance of their experience; the resort to citation; the repetitive reference to traditional sources; the self deprecating tone” (Melman, 1995, p. 313), all testifying, Melman argues, to a lack of self-confidence.

Despite a growing recognition of the contribution of women to travel writing (Amoia & Knapp, 2005; Foster & Mills, 2002), and with works by women writers increasingly finding their way into travel anthologies (Amoia & Knapp, 2005; Foster & Mills, 2002; Pryce, 2015; Robinson, 1990) and the critical literature (Melman, 1995; Pratt, 1992; Rose, 1993) Thompson’s “pattern of prejudice” still exists today, as published travel writing by women remains heavily outweighed by that of men (Oggins, 2014), and travel literature awards are to a great extent biased towards male writers (Oggins, 2014; Wheeler, 2017).

For my own project, writing about traditionally “feminine” topics centred around kitchens and cooking, this has meant understanding that there now exists a tradition—albeit under-recognised—of women’s travel writing into which my own work can be inserted.

4.3 Domestic Ethnography, Food and Women’s Travel Writing

At this point we need to briefly turn to the use of domestic ethnographies in travel writing as a textual device. For those writing about the East, as has been discussed at length, access to the domestic space was often accessible only by female travellers. Thus domestic ethnographies, that is detailed ethnographic writing centred around the domestic space, were a textual device largely available only to female travel writers (Melman, 1995).

Many of these domestic ethnographies centre on food and its preparation and cooking. Food, which often acts as a cultural entry point by its very necessity and familiarity, has only more recently become the focus of a branch of travel writing in its own right, in which travel is undertaken for the specific purpose of experiencing the food of another place or culture (Bardhi, Ostberg, & al, 2010; Chez, 2011; Germann Molz, 2007). This concept, branded “culinary tourism” (Long, 2004), sees

food as a gateway into another culture. Food is, of course, a constant necessity for any traveler, man or woman. As Launay summarises, “The passing traveler was not always in a position to participate in—much less comment intelligently about—sex, religion or politics. On the other hand, not only was he invariably able to sample the food; he generally had no other choice.” (Launay, 2003, p. 27)

Food may also represent pleasure, and ritual, and can come to represent the “other” of another culture (Abbey, 2006). With travel writing in relative decline in the late twentieth century, the “ethnic cookbook fills the void left by the absence of travel writing, and takes up some of its conventions.” (Abbey, 2006, p. 3) The reader of culinary travel literature performs a kind of armchair culinary tourism, permitting a safe experience of the other. By examining food's wide variety of cultural and symbolic roles in a given society, we can better understand the people who live there, and the traditions and gender roles associated with that society (Landrigan, 2014).

The domestic ethnographies of writers like Stark and Maillart are an important contribution because they reveal the early development of culinary travel literature. I would argue that their works, by subverting the traditional gendered approach to writing about travel, create a depth and detail about food and cooking that allows them to bring writing about food into a broader cultural perspective, in “a triangle between food, gender, and place.” (Landrigan, 2014, p. 298)

A complementary group of female writers exists—those who travelled primarily in order to research and write about food, rather than those whose writing about food was a by-product of their travel experiences. Claudia Roden (1968), for example, wrote extensively of domestic spaces in her travels through the Middle East; M.F.K. Fisher (1943, 1964) travelled in France and Switzerland and wrote of her food experiences there; and Elizabeth David (1950) wrote of culinary encounters in Italy and France. A full discussion of these early travelling food writers is outside the scope of this exegesis, but it is worth noting the significant and overlapping contributions they have made to both food and travel writing.

5. Textual Analysis

I would now like to turn to a closer analysis of the work of two female travel writers from the early twentieth century in more depth, particularly focusing on the use of point of view and close description in their writing. Two case studies, Ella Maillart's *Turkestan Solo*, and Freya Stark's *The Valleys of the Assassins*, both published in 1934, are followed by an analysis of my own text.

As a creative practitioner writing about food and kitchens in the context of travel and culture, I am specifically interested in *how* these authors use point of view in order to offer the reader privileged insight into the domestic spaces they encountered. How precisely were kitchens and descriptions of food preparation used within the text to allow readers to experience the sensory aspects of food and its preparation and consumption? This feminine and intimate point of view, as has been explored earlier, differed from the prevailing subjects and viewpoints of the male counterparts of these female travel writers.

I also examine how these texts differed from the broader field of travel writing in which they are situated, and how they have influenced my own creative work, "The Kitchen of Joy".

5.1 Turkestan Solo

There exist very few academic studies of the work of the adventurer, explorer and travel writer Ella Maillart. Yet her work offers an opportunity to examine the perspective of a female writer situated outside mainstream travel literature. Writing on the cusp of the colonial and post-colonial period, Maillart inhabits the fringes of conventional travel writing of the time as a woman of Swiss (and therefore neutral and technically non-colonial) origin, and someone who was, by her own assertion, not really a writer. Claiming she did not travel to write, as many of her contemporaries did, but instead wrote in order to travel, Maillart's self-deprecating and apologist stance is typical of many female travel writers of her time (Bassnett, 2002; Melman, 1995), but at odds with her subsequent success as a writer over the following two decades. Her work later fell into obscurity, in part because of the lack

of a Swiss tradition of women's travel writing into which her work could be inserted (Borella, 2006).

Turkestan Solo, her first critically successful work, was published in French in 1934 as *Des Montes célestes aux sables rouges* and translated by Maillart herself into English in 1935. In it, the author recounts her journey from Moscow through Russian Turkestan. Seeing herself as a novice journalist, Maillart plans to quietly investigate the Communist work collectives of the newly-formed Soviet Union. Her hope is to eventually reach Chinese Sinkiang, off-limits to foreigners at the time.

As she travels, Maillart becomes less interested in the collectivism she intended to study, and it becomes clear that the predominant focus of Maillart's observations is the women around her. According to Borella, Maillart's gender "allowed her to make observations about women and children that may not have appeared subject-worthy to her male counterparts" (Borella, 2006), and her writing is enriched by detailed descriptions of women going about their daily lives—women in marketplaces buying food, women in their homes, women's cooking practices and methods, social conventions around food and hospitality, and women's interactions within in the larger social group. In doing so Maillart makes a broader commentary about life for women, especially rural women, under Soviet rule.

In one descriptive passage Maillart recounts her stay in the mountains of the Chuguchak Pass with a group of nomadic Mongolian herders, and her repeated encounters with Patma, a Mongol woman. Maillart initially gives the reader a wide view of her surrounds, a mountain pasture surrounded by deep ravines.

The mountain reveals itself between two cliff-like faces of ruddy rock built up of obliquely running strata. (p. 82)

She then narrows her focus to the camp itself, a cluster of yurts with herds of horses, cattle and sheep, mares for milking, and a lone camel, describing the structure of one of the yurts in detail. The following day Maillart introduces herself to Patma, and this wider point of view narrows as we enter through the *double door-flap*, followed

by *the double door of carved wood* to enter the intimacy of Patma's yurt, and suddenly understand that this is no ordinary dwelling.

“Aman zisba!” I say, going onto the smallest of the yurts.

“Aman,” a woman with regular features answers gently.

She has the immense wing of an eagle in her hand, and is using it to sweep the koshmou on the floor. (p. 90)

Maillart reports without commentary, simply observing and relaying this extraordinary detail without further exoticising the scene. The very improbability of an eagle wing used as a broom lends an air of veracity, yet Maillart has the reader understand that Patma leads a relatively impoverished life, evidenced by her occupying the smallest yurt in the camp, poorly furnished.

We also understand from this exchange that Maillart and Patma share at least some common language, although it's not made explicitly clear which language is being used – Mongolian, Kyrgyz, or even Russian. Maillart had an uncommon skill with languages, speaking fluent Russian, and was often able to absorb local languages as she travelled (Borella, 2006). She notes that Patma:

...is intelligent. She does not ask the same incomprehensible question five times running and always on a louder note, like the rest of her compatriots. (p. 91)

In this sentence lies some of the contradiction inherent in Maillart's writing about the East. This could be seen as reinforcing a stereotype of the superior and more educated traveller. Yet Maillart is highlighting a difference between the men of the tribe, who have limited means of communicating with Maillart, and Patma, a woman with whom Maillart seems to have a means of both verbal and non-verbal communication, *our conversation is carried on by gestures*. Maillart then directs our gaze to the hearth at the centre of the yurt, and Patma's preparations to feed her children.

Then her four children arrive wanting a meal. Out of the embers she takes a copper jug and pours some boiling water on a dark square of stuff which makes a thick liquid that looks like coffee. It is an extract made with a mixture of tea and clotted cream. Then she takes some millet seed flour, mixes it in a wooden bowl with milk and the 'tea' extract, and makes an appetizing-looking mess that they greedily lap up. (p. 91)

The food is unfamiliar to western readers, but Maillart gives a detailed description of its preparation. It is possibly a type of tsampa, a mixture of tea and flour commonly consumed in Tibet, but also used by Mongolian nomads.

Maillart's illustration of Patma herself alerts the reader to the woman's strength and maternal beauty despite her impoverished state. There is an intimacy to Maillart's gaze that differentiates it from that of a male, in that she has freedom to describe the woman fully without impropriety. As her gaze lingers, we are permitted to do so.

I have grown fond of her resigned face whose gentle features I have watched, now illumined from above by the white rays of the sun through the hole in the roof, now from below by the flickering fire.

Patma brushes her teeth with one finger, then rinses her mouth out and spits into the ashes: earnestly she asks me to give her a toothbrush. (p. 97)

Maillart regrets that she has none to spare other than her own, but in this small but intimate moment we can appreciate the closeness with which Maillart is permitted to be present with Patma, even during such a personal moment as cleaning her teeth. As Maillart writes of the other, however, she is herself othered, observed and scrutinised by the nomads and their neighbours who

...succeed each other, coming to gaze at us in two or three rows. (p. 90)

When Maillart leaves Patma's yurt with a female travelling companion to bathe in the next ravine, she is followed by Patma's many children and wonders,

What will they think, seeing our white bodies plunge in the natural pool? (p. 92)

Maillart is subjected to the Mongolian men of the camp repeatedly discussing her in her presence, wondering where her husband is (Maillart was, and remained, single) and commenting on the rarity of fair women. As they laugh and talk about her, Maillart subtly but firmly rejects these gendered attitudes, and maintains a fierce independence that must have, at times, seemed precarious or even dangerous, recognising the risks taken by a single travelling woman.

For the most part, however, Maillart is able to enjoy her stay in the yurt camp and absorb all the experiences she can. Maillart and her travelling companions agree to pay for the slaughter of a sheep, to be shared amongst the nomads as well as themselves. What follows is a vivid, detailed description of the feast that follows. The lamb, once slaughtered, simmers in...

...an enormous hemispherical cauldron resting on a tripod. (p. 93)

At each stage of the eating we have the privilege of an intimate point of view, directly adjacent to the female cook in the centre of the yurt.

From the cauldron out comes the liver, which is cut into slices, in addition to chunks of fat...The meal is eaten with the fingers, by making small sandwiches of liver and fat which are plunged into a bowl containing salt passed from hand to hand. The delicate flavour is delicious. (pp. 94-95)

By the addition of sensory imagery—the heat and steam of the cauldron, the cutting of the liver, the slippery feel of mutton grease on Maillart's fingers, the taste of salt and fat—we feel like direct participants in the feast itself as it unfolds.

The woman then takes the pieces of meat from the cauldron...the head and joints going into a wooden platter...our host takes up the head, gouges the eyes out, and eats the points of the ears on the end of his knife.

The meat is delicious....so tender and succulent, that even we are full we go on energetically chewing for the pleasure of having the feel of the firm, sweet-tasting flesh in our mouths. (p. 95)

Maillart contrasts the succulent and tender lamb meat with the rather graphic description of the host's consumption of the eyes and ears. Again, she offers no commentary on this behaviour, but simply passes information to the reader unadorned. When noting the order in which the meat is passed around the inside of the crowded yurt, Maillart again offers no interpretation on what she reports:

When the guests have finished, the dish is passed to the other men, then to the children, and finally to the women. (p. 95)

With this statement, she allows the reader to understand the existing hierarchy in the camp and its social structure. Melman has commented on the the “disregard for ethnographic detail and the scarcity of reference to manners and customs” apparent in the travel writing of men (Melman, 1995), particularly in the Muslim East. One of the characteristics of Maillart's writing is its emphasis on ethnographic details, particularly as it relates to food and domestic environments and the manners and customs associated with these. These rich domestic details and intimate points of view provide a counterbalance to the travel writing proffered by Maillart's male contemporaries, and offers me a way to consider my own work—travel writing that concentrates on kitchens, cooking and women—in context.

5.2 The Valleys of the Assassins

Freya Stark, described by Ella Maillart as “the best of the travel writers” (Borella, 2006) wrote *The Valleys of the Assassins* after travels through northern Persia. Ostensibly on an archeologic and map-making expedition of her own devising, Stark has her own agenda – to rediscover the fabled Castles of the Assassins, and to spend time amongst the nomadic peoples who inhabit the area. Perhaps rejecting the approach to travel writing as favoured by the Royal Geographic Society, Stark says

of her own text, “History and geography, arguments and statistics are left out: I mention the things I like to remember as they come into my head.” (Stark, 1934)

This declaration of Stark’s is revealing as it permits her, in addition to writing what might be expected of her as a geographer or explorer or archaeologist, and instead allows her to concentrate on writing about those things that captivate her interest. In *The Valleys of the Assassins*, this often proved to be the women she met, and like Maillart, Stark observed them with a keen and sympathetic eye, allowing the reader to visualise details that could come only from very close observation. In the following scene Stark visits Luristan, in northern Persia, and in a section titled ‘*The Law of Hospitality*’ is invited into a Lur camp by two young women.

I watched the beauty of the two girls – a fine beauty of an old race, with small hands and thin lips and long oval faces. On their head they wore little skull caps embroidered with beads round which they wound the voluminous dark turban. There were beads around their ankles too, where the scarlet trousers were fastened tightly and ended in a woollen fringe over the little bare heels. (p. 70)

These close details of the women’s dress and the variations she encounters from region to region is a hallmark of Stark’s travel writing. The descriptions pepper her text as bright shots of colour and texture, contrasting with a landscape that is often dry and featureless. She continues, describing her host, the daughter of the head of the tribe.

The daughter of the house had a velvet coat too, full skirted and left open in the front. She had a turquoise and gold ring in her nose, over the tattoo mark on her lip; her hands and feet were tattooed with thin blue branches of palm leaf... (p. 70)

The effect of these combined details of the girl’s appearance is to render the other exotic, and yet Stark is simply describing the exact dress and appearance of the women of Luristan of the time with an almost ethnographic detachment. As the women take her into their camp and offer Stark and her party a meal, the daughter of

the house begins by making bread and we see Stark's already intimate gaze shift with difficulty from the features of the girl's appearance and adornments to the breadmaking itself.

...on her wrists she wore heavy silver bangles which flashed in the firelight as she kneaded the dough for our supper.

I wondered if among their poets, who still sing in the old manner about the things they know, there is not someone who has told the splendour of his beloved's hands with their silver bracelets, as she tosses the bread from one to the other with a swift and lovely movement in this most beautiful of household tasks. (p. 70)

This is a beautiful and poetic passage which could be accused of romanticizing the scene before her, but Stark shows that even the most simple of daily household tasks like breadmaking, can be unexpectedly expressive and lyrical. The effect is to concentrate her point of view even more closely on a single detail – the girl's hands – as she makes bread. The importance of the everyday for women writers has often been noted (Bassnett, 2002; Rose, 1993) and for Stark an attention to everyday matters like breadmaking is raised to the level of poetry by the use of language and imagery – the heavy silver bangles flashing in the firelight, the *swift and lovely* movement as the bread passes from hand to hand.

Stark quickly realises the family in the small colony of four tents is very poor, despite their offer of hospitality.

They had neither meat nor fowl nor eggs, milk, rice, tea nor sugar: nothing in fact but the essential bag of flour and a tiny patch of tomatoes and cucumbers of which they proceeded to pick every one with the noble hospitality of their code. (p. 69)

In Stark's description it is difficult to know if the list of foods she describes as being absent is one she has encountered in other camps or villages, or her own list of basic requirements for travel, but they are all common foodstuffs in this part of Persia, the rice used to make pilau and the tea and sugar usually an essential component of

Persian hospitality. Despite this poverty they determine to offer Stark a meal of what little there is— a few cooked tomatoes and freshly-made bread. While the children of the household look on,

The tomatoes were cooking in a pot while our hunger in the meanwhile was being stayed with raw cucumbers. (p. 70)

Once again as readers we find ourselves directly beside the hearth or fire, in an intimate position beside the cook, as Stark describes what she sees but also comments obliquely on the place of women in the hierarchy.

Four little boys, subdued with expectation, sat in a silent row... While the little daughter... busied herself with household jobs, knowing well that her chance of feast was remote. (p. 71)

Having been brought into the situation we feel Stark's discomfort at being offered the meagre sum total of the household's food. The women and children watch her every mouthful in silence, apart from

One boy, unable as yet quite to control his feelings, followed the plates with his eyes: his tears rose slowly, the corners of his little mouth turned down. His mother, ashamed, gave him a small slap and then, surreptitiously, offered him her fingers to lick, on which some savour of tomato still lingered. (p. 71)

The description of children and the joys and small tragedies of their lives is another of Stark's traits, and *The Valleys of the Assassins* is filled with both delightful and sorrowful accounts of children—child brides, the near-death of a boy from snakebite, to the everyday mischief and games children play everywhere. Women and children share a low status in the eyes of many male travel writers, yet Stark's descriptions of the interactions between mothers and children lends a further layer of intimacy to her work.

Ever mindful of local custom and the strict Lur laws of hospitality she has already encountered on her journey, Stark devises a way in which she can allow her hosts to save face.

To say anything was impossible: our hostess would have been humiliated beyond words: but one could leave a part of the dinner on one's plate. I pretended to be satisfied half-way through the microscopic meal, and the four little boys lapped up what remained. (p.71)

The busy little daughter remains hungry, and Stark provides a salient commentary on her observations of women.

As for the daughter, she had learnt already what is what in this world. She neither got nor expected a share. (p.71)

In this scene we see Stark, as Rose defines it, *engage with the everyday as an end in itself* (Rose, 1993), not as a means to a different end, for example to simply be fed and move on as many passing travellers might. Stark inhabits the moment carefully, imbuing it with the significance of observing and honouring local custom. This very intimacy, enhanced by her vivid descriptions and observations, allows the reader an insight into the interior of a Muslim home and family, a place of little interest to male travel writers of the time (Melman, 1995).

In my own work, an analysis of which appears below, I have been influenced by Stark's perspective, lending gravity to the everyday and elevating the domestic into something of beauty and significance.

5.3 “The Kitchen of Joy”

My own creative work, “The Kitchen of Joy”, is a non-fiction travel memoir told from inside the kitchens of five Islamic women around the world. After spending time with women in their kitchens on other journeys, I committed to writing a travel memoir that concentrated as much on these intimate, interior spaces as it did on broad exterior landscapes, in order to provide both a commentary on the lives of

ordinary women around the world and a travel narrative with an alternate point of view.

The women I spent time with were from Far West China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Iraq, the first two of which have formed the creative component of this exegesis. The countries were chosen in part because the food of these regions reflects the history of cuisine as we know it, but also because they have been infrequently travelled in recent times, either by reason of political instability, perceived lack of safety or geographic remoteness, and are therefore less frequently the subject of travel narratives.

In this passage, set in Kashgar in western China, I am helping prepare lunch in the home of a Uyghur woman, Meryem. I have been cooking together with her for a week when she teaches me to make her favourite dish, a rice *polo* sweetened with carrots. As Meryem and I cook, a discussion about food becomes an opportunity for Meryem to discuss her father, and the grief of his unexpected death.

As with Maillart and Stark's examples above, point of view became an essential device to establish the intimate connection between reader and subject. I was initially a kitchen observer, taking notes and asking questions, but over the course of the research period I also became an active kitchen participant, assisting with the cooking of dishes and gaining a deeper understanding of recipes, and also of the women I spent time with, through the practice of cooking. I have chosen the following scene because it most closely aligns with the objective of my writing, namely to open a window into the world of another woman, permitting a privileged point of view of her life and experiences.

Meryem flung the first wash of tea into the corner of the room, then tore a piece of crisp browned nan bread and passed it to me. Her hands were soft but the knuckles reddened by cold and hard work. (p.99)

Our attention is drawn to Meryem's hands as she first performs the unusual act of discarding her tea, then literally breaking bread with me as we sit on the floor of the

sitting room around the stove. Meryem opens the conversation with a mention of her father, of whom she had not previously spoken.

“You know my father was a baker.”

When she mentioned him her voice filled with love. I wondered where his bakery was, and whether we could visit. (p.99)

We learn that baking is considered a noble Uyghur profession, because bread, like tea, is essential for every meal, but before the conversation can go further it is necessary to begin preparing the *polo*.

Fatima returned with a bowl of carrots, fat and bright yellow. Meryem stood each carrot upright, its point pivoting on the cutting board, and scraped off the skin with sharp downward thrusts of the blade of her bone-handled knife. (p.100)

Again, our perspective is narrowed to a view of Meryem’s hands and their actions, bringing us directly into the activity of cooking, as though looking down at our own hands preparing food.

I wanted to hear more about her father. “Was that a happy time, when you were baking with him?” I asked. (p.100)

“A very happy time. But soon after I got married he closed the bakery, because my mother wasn’t well.” Meryem sighed. She took one of the carrots from the pile and began to slice it diagonally, stacking the slices together, then cutting them carefully into long batons. (p.100)

She goes on to discuss her father’s generosity, both with his time and skills teaching apprentice bakers, and with his grandchildren, but at the same time the ongoing description of Meryem’s hands at work narrows our point of view even further from the house, to the tiny sitting room, to the task at hand. The intention of the passage is to draw attention to a view only of Meryem’s hands, and how they help her express, in part, what she is feeling.

Meryem's hands stilled, and she looked out through the burlap curtain as though it wasn't there, her grey eyes staring, unblinking. The only noise was the soft hiss of the stove. (p.100)

As Meryem pauses, not moving but clearly remembering something, we are invited to imagine her thoughts at this moment.

“One day he was washing his feet, preparing for prayer.” She paused for long seconds. “He was sitting on a chair and suddenly fell off. The doctor said he had a heart attack. How could that be? He'd never been ill before in his life. They took him straight to the hospital but he was already dead.” (p.101)

The news of her beloved father's unexpected death seems as shocking again in the retelling as it was at the time of his death. Meryem's confusion and disbelief are still apparent, as we see the event of his death through her mind's eye. Meryem seems almost to be talking to herself, remembering the events in the vain hope that somehow, this time, the outcome will be different. As the narrator, I have become invisible in this instant as we privately observe Meryem's most painful memory.

Meryem looked down as if noticing her own hands and the carrots for the first time, as though she had been in a trance. She began a furious chopping, the knife blade whacking into the wooden board with sharp percussion. When the chopping stilled, she lifted the back of one hand and wiped her eyes.

“Now we go and cook the polo.” (p.101)

The contrast between Meryem's emotions and the domestic tasks she is performing are viewed together, and the reader has a sense that Meryem's grief is still raw and difficult to face unless her hands and mind are occupied. Still, we have been given an insight into Meryem's lived experience through the medium of food, with the imagery of a cooking task used to convey a difficult emotion like grief. As Lalonde notes, food is “more than an object; it is an event or lived experience where the senses (visual, taste, smell, touch, sound) meet with emotions and cognitive energies.” (Marshall, 2005, p. 79)

6. Reflexive Section

A central goal of this project has been to represent the intimacy, beauty and wisdom of the kitchen as experienced by the traveller. Kitchens and their attendant labour are rarely given sufficient attention in travel narratives, and so my primary objective has been to examine the ways in which this space has been represented on the page by other travel writers. Maillart and Stark were amongst the few writing about kitchens and those who inhabited them, usually other women. They did so in order to draw attention to the particular characteristics of domestic landscapes and the women within them as a way of making broader commentary about the nature of life for women in traditional Islamic cultures they visited, in Kyrgyzstan and Iran respectively. Although this too was one of my objectives, I was also interested in the way in which women create life narratives around food and cooking, using food as touchstones to connect stages of their life's story.

By drawing attention to food, cooking and the places in which this occurs, we can see how food can act as both a personal and cultural bridge. As Showalter reminds us, “food is a fast track to the heart of a culture” (Showalter, 2002, p. 36) and shared experiences around food, cooking and eating are recognized as an integral part of entering into and understanding another culture (Abbey, 2006; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013; Launay, 2003). I realized very early on that as a travel writer I wasn't an explorer in a geographic sense—there being very few places remaining on this earth that have not been thoroughly explored and documented. Instead, I was exploring not a geographic landscape but a culinary one, leading readers on a personal investigation of another culture through its food, what it means to be a woman in that culture, and a consideration of the rich interior landscapes of these women's lives.

The first challenge was to create a sense of the intimacy that exists when two women are cooking together in a kitchen. When a traveller enters into the house of the other, a threshold is crossed from the public into the private. Some spaces within a house are more intimate than others, and are spaces into which one needs to be invited. Kitchens are such a space, like bedrooms and harems, in which stories are shared and confidences exchanged. When women are side by side cooking and preparing food

together there is the creation of a “casual intimacy” (Renov, 1999, p. 141) that enables access into that woman’s world and an opportunity to hear her story as she wishes to tell it. Access to these intimate spaces has historically been more possible for women travel writers in the Muslim world, and like Stark and Maillart before me I have found this to be true in the context of my field research.

I considered how to develop the sense of intimacy described above. Stark and Maillart created this based on strongly sensory imagery and description, as well as an intimate point of view, in order to draw attention to the beauty and complexity involved in what might otherwise be considered ordinary domestic tasks. Maillart focuses on details of the women’s dress and descriptions of their faces, but also evokes sensory aspects of breadmaking, by detailing the kneading of bread and the details of tools used that delivers to the reader a complete sensory experience – how the subject looked, smelled, sounded, felt and tasted. Stark uses these techniques but also draws attention to the interactions between women with each other and with their children. I utilized similar techniques in my own writing, to help render a space in which there is an intimacy with the subject. This I was able to achieve through the use of sensual descriptions of food—the sound of noodles being torn by hand into a pot of boiling water, the smell of peppers cooking in oil, the sound of a slicing knife—and also point of view. The reader becomes cocooned in a space in which the normal rules of discourse between self and other are suspended.

Lastly, it was important to me that these intimate kitchen scenes were used as a biographic device, so that these scenes were not mere postcards of the subject but were given their own subjectivity, allowing the women’s stories to develop alongside the cooking itself. It was vital to ensure that the subject’s voice was heard and my view was not the only one represented, so that the subject was able to genuinely speak with their own voice within the story, and with agency over how that scene evolves and progresses. So as the dish and its preparation progresses so does the conversation and the narrative. The poet Donald Hall speaks of the gaze, when two people are engaged side by side, at the important “third thing”, whether that be a piece of music or the practice of cooking, in order to provide “a site of joint rapture or contentment” (D. Hall, 2005). He posits that these important third things are vital to human beings in our close connections to another person. In a kitchen,

that shoulder by shoulder work involves observing the third thing, the cooking itself, that breaks the tension and focuses the gaze. It allows the subject to place her gaze where it is most comfortable, then in her own time to tell the rest of her story. It becomes a question of interplay between writer and subject, rather than observer and observed as the dominant point of view taken in many travel narratives.

7. Conclusion

In this project I am testing the hypothesis that there might be something of value and cultural nuance in domestic narratives as a form of travel writing. In essence, I am investigating the ability of travel writing to open rich points of cultural encounter between western writers and Islamic women. By examining in close detail the techniques used by Ella Maillart and Freya Stark to write these domestic ethnographies, I have been able to consider the place of their techniques in my own writing to achieve a sense of intimacy and personal biography.

For travel writers, it is an important point to consider—can we contribute to the discourse around our representations of those we write about? As we've seen in the literature review above, there exists a complex and nuanced relationship when women travellers write about the East, a relationship that differed in important aspects from that of their male counterparts. I have highlighted areas in the literature where women's writing has been incredibly sympathetic to the East, and how those arose in particular when women travellers wrote about their encounters with other women and with domestic life.

It is this complex binary that renders women's travel writing both interesting and engaging and opens the possibility of a different relationship between the observer and the observed when women write about travel. As a writer you are always searching for other possibilities, for new ways in which an objective can be achieved. In this case, the possibility may exist that these writers were able to reclaim something that had been overlooked by adopting a women's particular perspective, a female point of view. We have seen that Stark and Maillart, with their intimate descriptions of women and of domestic encounters, evoked an East that was very different to the prevailing writing of the time. The essence is that these writers had a point of view that was open to women's experience, with its alternate view of domestic female space.

I have understood this to be one way in which women travel writers distinguished themselves from their male contemporaries, by focusing on interior, private spaces as much as exterior places and experiences. The value of this study has been to

demonstrate the potential for travel writers today to reconsider this kind of portrayal as seen in earlier writing that has been largely overlooked. As a Western woman writing about travel and culture, there exists the possibility for this kind of travel writing to be claimed as the beginning, perhaps, of a different approach to representations of the other, and particularly of other women.

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Creative Component
The Kitchen of Joy

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Prologue

No matter where I started any journey, I always ended up in the same place – the kitchen of a stranger, connecting over food and cooking, jotting down notes and recipes. In kitchens there is comfort in the solidity of kitchen walls, the heat from the stove or the fire, the aliveness of ingredients waiting to be turned into a meal. Kitchens are overlooked spaces, relegated to either the hottest or coldest part of a house, out of sight and earshot. But they are alive with purpose and ideas, and, as I came to discover, with secrets and confidences too.

Years before this story begins, I spent an afternoon in the kitchen of a Uyghur woman in Kashgar, in China's far west. Wearing a richly patterned dress of dark green silk and with a black scarf covering her hair, Aygul welcomed me into the light-filled courtyard at the centre of her home in the Old City, a medieval maze of narrow lanes and smooth brown adobe buildings. First, as is the tradition in Uyghur homes, she helped me wash by pouring a stream of cold, clean water from a slender silver pitcher over my dusty hands.

“Hold them over the bowl,” my guide Omer instructed.

I clasped my hands together as the water trickled into a broad dish balanced on a wooden stool.

Aygul's tiny kitchen was like a narrow corridor to one side of the courtyard. Inside, an old red wooden dresser did for a bench, and beside it two heavy gas burners rested on a small cupboard. The kitchen walls were lined with biscuit-coloured tiles cemented into pleasing geometric patterns. Aygul was going to teach me to make *laghmannn*, Uyghur pulled noodles, as arranged by Omer. It was my first visit to Kashgar, and I had asked if I could spend a morning doing a cooking class. As no such thing existed in Kashgar, Omer had managed to find someone willing to teach me a few Uyghur dishes. It felt a little uncomfortable, being in the home of a stranger with a man I barely knew, but at the same time quite safe.

Lightly oiling her hands, Aygul rolled the noodle dough she had made until it was the thickness of her little finger, coiling it into a neat spiral to rest. I watched from a stool by the stove, asking questions, taking notes.

“You have children?” Aygul asked, making kitchen small talk.

Omer translated. He was chaperoning us too, ensuring the conversation stayed within the neat lines proscribed by the Chinese Government, on whom he relied for his tourism licence. He’d warned me in advance: off-limit topics included the growing Uyghur separatist movement, the Communist government’s curtailment of Islamic religious freedoms and Chinese plans to ‘restore’ the Old City. We stuck to safe topics instead - children, husbands, food. At least, they were still safe topics for me then.

“I have two girls,” I said. “The big one is nine years old, the little one’s five.” My own girls had no interest in cooking and had gone to the bazaar with their father for the afternoon.

“She’s five too,” Aygul said, inclining her head towards the slight child with cropped hair who hung at the kitchen door, looking downcast after earning a scolding from her mother for tipping over a dish of green peppers.

Our hands worked in unison now, mixing and shaping more noodle dough, chopping, and stirring to prepare the rich vegetable and mutton sauce that would top the noodles. An easy familiarity settled gently over us, the kind that happens when you cook side by side with someone.

“Your house is wonderful,” I said. “I love that you could walk straight past your door in the laneway without knowing that behind the wall is this beautiful house with a fig tree growing right in the middle of the courtyard.”

Aygul’s eyes fixed on the pot, but words escaped her lips.

I waited for Omer to translate. He looked sharply at Aygul, and both his and Aygul’s faces turned pale.

“What did Aygul say?” I asked.

Aygul glanced at Omer, then at me.

Omer translated. “They’re trying to make us move. They want all of us Uyghurs out, then they’re going to demolish the Old City.”

Aygul searched my face to see how I would respond, react.

My face creased, concerned. “I heard the rumours,” I said. “I’m so sorry this is happening.”

She nodded. Omer too.

All the forbidden subjects poured out one by one. I witnessed Aygul’s anguish at the thought of losing the life she knew - her religion, her culture, her home. The need

to tell someone, even a stranger, about how the government wanted her to relocate to a bland apartment block to live among Chinese neighbours. How the government planned to disperse the Uyghurs from the Old City to dilute the risk of separatism, to stop them plotting secretly—as they imagined it—in homes hidden behind walls.

Aygul had crossed a line, we all knew it, in a moment so intensely intimate it took me by surprise.

The noodle dough had rested enough. Aygul took the coils and stretched them between her two hands, fingers twisting slightly as she pulled the dough into a pile of noodles the thickness of twine.

“We better get these into the pot!” she said, the moment over.

I thought about that moment often in the years afterwards. Aygul had no reason to trust me, yet she had. I sensed she’d risked a great deal by telling me what she did, at a time when the Chinese government had begun closely scrutinising the Uyghurs. But what kind of world was it, when women couldn’t discuss secrets and worries inside their own kitchens?

I had secrets of my own, held close because they were too painful to bring out and examine. My marriage, strong for so very long, was failing. I didn’t understand. I tried everything I knew to fix it but nothing seemed to change the sad, empty core. Everyone told us how happy we were—we did everything together, we never fought. But I knew, deep inside, something was unsound, like an off-note in an orchestra that, once heard, keeps repeating.

Unable to resolve it with him, I set off to search for the answer alone, as though preparing myself for the loneliness ahead. While I sought out kitchens, I suspect I was seeking answers too, to my own problems, to the vexed questions I almost dared not ask. The kitchens I always visited deserved to be at the story’s centre. But the peripheries of the story, my own close-held secrets? Those I was still figuring out. Perhaps the kitchens of strangers would draw them out.

I felt a pull towards the kitchens of the Middle East, where it seemed the history of cuisine began – not just food for survival, but food as pleasure, as culture, and as a pursuit in itself. If the kitchen was my place of comfort, then food was my language,

history and geography. Food was the best and often only reason I travelled somewhere. My imagined wanderings began in Persia, where food was as important as art and literature, and, where, under layers of history and earlier empires, the world's first recipes had been carefully pressed into clay tablets thirty-five centuries before. The three cracked clay rectangles crowded with neat lines of cuneiform were discovered near Nineveh, site of modern-day Mosul in Iraq, along the fertile valley of the River Tigris. Buried in obscurity amongst the 40,000-items of the Yale Babylonian Collection, they were neglected until being translated by a French historian, Jean Bottéro, in the 1980s. The Yale Culinary Tablets, as they became known, detailed twenty-five ancient Mesopotamian recipes: lists of obscure ingredients forgotten by history or now extinct: *tarru*-bird, *samidu*, and *andahsu*; but also familiar flavours: braised lamb with wild licorice; barley, mint and coriander pilaf; sweets made with dates and pistachio. On occasion a voice would speak across three-and-a half-thousand years with a phrase that might have come from any modern cookbook: *When it has come to a boil, add minced leek, garlic and onion (but not too much onion)*. According to Bottéro, the tablets “revealed a cuisine of striking richness, refinement, sophistication and artistry.” Until that point the oldest existing recipes had been recorded by Apicius, a Roman, in his *De re Coquinaria* (On the Subject of Cooking), in the fourth century. But the Yale Tablets predated Apicius by at least two thousand years. It was an astounding discovery that made barely a ruffle on the international stage of culinary history. Perhaps, having long considered Europe as the birthplace of cuisine, it proved challenging to accept deep down that our established system of food and taste came not from European ancestors, but from the far more problematic Middle East.

The Middle East had never seemed a safe place to travel, at least in my lifetime, yet I felt it draw me in, like a magnet. When I ordered in a restaurant, I read the entire menu, all the way from the first entrée to the last desserts, balancing imagined tastes in my mind, thinking about how individual dishes might smell and taste. Then I always chose the least familiar dish. I craved new experiences, a taste of the unknown. So it was with travel. I resolved that I would travel through kitchens of this part of the world, meeting the women who cooked in them, becoming familiar with unfamiliar territory. The site of the Yale Culinary Tablets' origins in Iraq, was off-limits to me, at least for now, so I decided instead to begin with parts of the

Islamic world more familiar, then spiral my way towards Persia. My journey would start in Kashgar, a place I felt brave enough to venture alone, and later I could follow some of the old Silk Road routes through Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and Turkey. But the ultimate destination would be Iran, the country that had once been the heart of the Persian Empire and at the birth of food culture. As the world began to unravel with extremism rising in every form, my courage wavered.

“You’re not seriously thinking about going to Iraq are you?” said my husband, when I floated the idea with him.

I shook my head. “Not Iraq, Iran. And only if it feels safe, after visiting other Muslim countries first.”

“Such as?”

“Turkey. Western China.”

“Can’t you just meet up with women from those countries here in Australia?” he asked.

“I’m really curious about these parts of the world,” I said. “I want to see them with my own eyes. And I feel like there is a side to this conversation about Islam that we’re not having. We’re talking about fundamentalists, and jihadists. We’re not talking about ordinary people.”

About joy, I thought. About women. I needed to find the people who lived, as Margaret Atwood said, *in the gaps between the stories*, outside the newsprint and rhetoric. I wanted to hear their stories. I wanted to find the joy again.

I knew from my own experience that there was much to learn by sitting in the kitchen of a stranger. Perhaps nothing more than the best way to cook artichokes, or the fastest way to peel a chestnut. But perhaps, while hands were occupied with the physical tasks of cooking, the mind was free to wander, the mouth free to speak. The truest insight might surface while a woman cooked. It was the wisdom of the kitchen, long ignored. Perhaps curiosity was the only way to uncover it. Not by banging on the front door of a country’s grand institutions and houses of parliament. But by going through the back door. The kitchen door.

Section One
Kashgar

Chapter One

For what gives value to travel is fear.

Albert Camus, 1937

In the dark I woke to the alarm in that frantic, jangled way, knowing I had a plane to catch. The wooden floorboards creaked under my bare feet as I slid from my bed, my body still craving my husband's warmth next to me. There was a heart-heaviness too, the heaviness of last minutes before you know you must leave your children. Dressed, I stole in to their dark bedrooms, their bodies arrested in deepest sleep. Bella lay on her back, long hair over the pillow, stretched the length of the bed, adult-tall. The quilt either side of her was smooth and undisturbed. It was as though she barely moved in the night, as calm in sleep as she was in life. I could make out the white rectangle of her desk with symmetrical stacks of school textbooks and Frankie magazines, and a row of containers for pens, lip gloss and paintbrushes. I leant down and kissed her soft face, murmuring *I love you*. She roused to the place before waking and whispered back to me. *Love you too*.

In the bedroom next door, I stepped over the tangle of clothes to where Lily lay curved in a nest of soft toys and cushions, twisted together with her quilt and sheets like a plaited Christmas wreath. I couldn't find her face at first, uncovering her feet by mistake at the head of the bed. As I searched for her top end she woke and half sat, arms outstretched for a hug. I held her close, drawing in the smell of her, enough to last me for a month. I could hear Matt wheeling my suitcase gently along the wooden verandah outside, bumping it on the uneven boards of our old Australian house.

"Love you Lil," I whispered. Her body had already begun to relax back into sleep in my arms.

"Love you Mum", she said. I laid her back down, head still at the wrong end of the bed.

At the airport Matt and I hugged awkwardly, him in the driver's seat, me in the passenger seat. Our shoulders nearest each other met and squished together, but our bodies were restrained by our seat belts.

"Have a safe flight," he said.

“Thanks.” Other, unspoken words, hung heavy in the air.

“I should...”

I nodded.

“...get home before the girls wake up.”

“Of course.”

“Message me when you get to Kashgar.”

“I will.”

With a click I undid my seat belt and slipped out into the dark airport morning, pulling my suitcase out of the trunk.

I stood alone, watching as the red tail lights of Matt’s car slipped away.

As the aircraft engines thundered I sucked in my breath and gripped the arm rests ever so slightly, waiting for that moment when the tug of the earth gives way to the inevitability of flight, and the weighing worries of the journey’s preparations give way to the journey itself. *It’s too late now*, I thought. Too late to wonder if this had ever been a good idea. Too late to return to my children, still sleeping at home on their side of the world. I flew to Kashgar.

My flight from Shanghai to Kashgar was the final leg after two bone-weary days in the air. This would be my third visit to this ancient and beautiful city. The first, five years before, was when I had met and cooked with AYGUL, the second a year later when I returned to Kashgar overland. The plane was filled with Chinese business people but only one Uyghur woman, ample and round-eyed, wearing a headscarf. Like all my fellow passengers, she fell asleep before we reached the end of the runway. They all slept through the green of China’s east, then the contoured loess plateaus of central China. We crossed at last into Xinjiang, in the far west. Would I be the only one to see the Tibetan Plateau to the south, serrated rows of mountains blanketed in snow? Or the craggy Tianshan Mountains like crooked teeth, to our north? Below us stretched the Taklamakan Desert, a vast emptiness. We passed through turbulent sandstorms, scouring the plane windows as though the desert was rising up to suffocate the aircraft. The plump man beside me, in loafers, didn’t notice. He also slept, snorting from time to time like a water buffalo.

For diversion, lunch was served and my fellow passengers obediently stirred themselves into an upright eating posture. Our food arrived in a cardboard box filled with small, mysterious packets – a red foil sachet of pickled mustard tuber, a miniature envelope of eight ‘Magic Wings’ peanuts, a sachet of dried orange peel, and a pale slab of cake. I nibbled at the orange peel, its texture and taste like soft soap.

By the time we flew over the Kashgar oasis and touched down on an airfield fringed with poplars, I was ravenous. I rode downtown in a green Kashgar taxi, my Uyghur driver splendid in a beaver fur hat and thick black coat. Despite the cold I wound down my window to catch the smoky smell of lamb grilling over charcoal as we passed a kebab seller. He folded a flat round of bread around three kebabs, pulling the meat off the metal spikes like sliding beads off a string. A waiting customer tucked the whole thing under his arm and strode away. Further on I saw mosques as small as a house with tiny minarets, then the grand arches of the bazaar, thronging with people. Outside the bazaar, baskets of quince and pomegranates shone pale gold and ruby red in the sun. Wagons piled with bread sat beside upright rows of rolled-up carpets and sacks of almonds and walnuts. Between them all wove a rushing tapestry of people - embroidered green prayer caps, a purple headscarf, a coat the colour of persimmons.

The reception of my hotel in Kashgar’s new town centre smelled of hotpot and dust. I registered as a foreign guest at the long, low desk under a row of clocks, like portholes in the wall. They gave the time in Beijing - 2 o’clock; Shanghai - 2 o’clock; Urumqi - 2 o’clock; and Kashgar - 2 o’clock. Despite three thousand miles separating Beijing and far west China, China operated on a single official time zone, Beijing time, to which the whole country conformed. The real time difference was three hours, placing Kashgar in the same time zone as Islamabad or Tashkent, but the locals had truncated it to two, to minimize disruption. All government businesses, trains and buses ran on Beijing time, while everything else in Kashgar (including breakfast, lunch and dinner) ran on a “black” unofficial time zone, Kashgar time. It was very confusing.

There were still some hours before meeting Omer, my former guide. We had travelled together on several trips, and our trust was mutual. Omer's knowledge of Uyghur history, culture, and traditions was impressive, and he spoke English well. His help would be invaluable for communication in a part of China where the Muslim locals spoke Uyghur rather than Chinese, and English was rarely spoken or understood.

I would be happy to help your further research of Uyghur food and cooking, he emailed, when I wrote to ask if he was interested in a project a little different from his usual guiding jobs. That was my official line, researching Uyghur food and cooking. Unofficially, I was searching for something more ephemeral, that intimate connection I had glimpsed with Aygul. Aygul, sadly, had moved away, but whether forcibly or voluntarily Omer didn't know. Instead, Omer knew someone else, the mother of a friend, who might be happy to have me as a guest in her kitchen, teaching me about Uyghur food and helping me to understand her life as a Muslim woman in China.

I can help you to find a such woman in Kashgar, may be in the old town. I will look for that kind woman in next days and I will let you know.

Did Omer mean *that kind woman*? Or *that kind of woman*? Both, I hoped. When I thought about meeting with a Uyghur woman in her home, a stranger, I felt uncertain. This wasn't a single cooking class, but hours spent in a stranger's home every day for two weeks. What if she didn't like me? And what if Omer's research was wrong and she turned out to be a terrible cook? What was I even doing here, chasing a sense of righting something wrong in my life without knowing what it was? I told myself to stop worrying. I went out to find something to eat.

I made my way to the Old City, Kashgar's beating heart. I remembered its medieval rabbit-warren of smooth adobe alleys, calm and quiet, with brightly painted doors of green and turquoise. But when I arrived the Old City's heart had been ripped out. The adobe courtyard homes with their trellised grapevines were gone, replaced with ugly new buildings. The alleys had been widened and the houses 'harmonized', a Chinese term meaning 'homogenized'. Aygul had been right, the government had gone ahead with their plan to remove Uyghurs from the Old City, supposedly under the pretext of modernization. The soft, curved walls and alleys of

old looked angular and stiff, out of proportion to their old selves, as though wearing new and poorly-fitting clothes. Their façades were covered by a veneer of colored plaster through which rough joinery and slapdash workmanship showed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. On every corner Uyghur-themed garbage cans sat beneath Uyghur-themed lamp posts. Nearby a Chinese government sign proclaimed *All ethnic groups live friendly together here*. I shuddered, imagining Aygul's traditional house and geometric tilework bulldozed, and rebuilt in a cheap imitation of the original. No wonder she hadn't come back.

Uyghurs still crowded the streets, and although the buildings had changed, the human landscape of Kashgar looked reassuring familiar. Women in bright headscarves and long skirts walked home with rounds of golden crisp *nan* bread tucked under their arms, the smell of freshly-baked bread in the air. The bakers stoked charcoal in the deep *tonur* ovens, laughing with their customers, while the butchers hung haunches of mutton outside their shops. In Hat Street, beaver hats sat on rows of wooden hat blocks. In the golden afternoon sunshine, the hat sellers stood meticulously combing dust from the dark chestnut fur, the setting light behind them catching every glistening hair. Children ran between their parents and strangers, squealing as they played tag.

I found myself on Coppersmiths' Street. The smiths sat on tiny wooden stools outside their shops, beating gleaming copper bowls over anvils. The men in their traditional embroidered green prayer caps hammered a metallic punctuation as I walked - *pok, pok-pok, pok, pok-pok*. Behind them hung finished copper bowls, woks, and copper implements for cooking a dozen eggs at once. I stopped at one stall to ask about the gigantic slotted copper spoons, as tall as a child. I realized they might be for stirring *polo*, a Uyghur rice pilaf with buttery rice, shreds of sweet carrot, and tender mutton, flavored with local apricots and quince. An old Uyghur man with a long white beard was delighted to help me, although we shared no common language.

"Polo?" I asked, pointing to the spoon.

"Polo?" he queried. He said it the same way I had, with the wrong intonation. It dawned on him suddenly. "Ah! *Polo!*" He nodded his head vigorously, smiling

and gesticulating. Now he stood and pretended to stir a giant vat of polo with the huge copper spoon. He mimed tasting some from the spoon's edge.

“*Polo!*”

It would be several days before I learned the Uyghur phrase for “delicious”, so I gave him two thumbs up to indicate the tastiness of his imaginary giant *polo*. He rolled with laughter, clasping his hands to his chest, delighted to have found a foreigner who not only knew *polo*, but had tasted it and found it good. He pressed a smaller version of the giant spoon into my hands. It was hand-made, stamped along its elegant handle with a pattern of interlacing semicircles, and rough on the edges from being hand cut. I knew it would soon wear to smoothness with use. Still hungry, I watched a man enter a small corner doorway hidden behind a row of *tonur* ovens nearby, and followed him inside.

The tiny restaurant was dim, a shaft of sun falling across pale blue walls decorated with broken white plaster lacework. Two men huddled over a tin plate of *samsa*, savoury baked parcels filled with mutton. *Samsa* had arrived in far west China from Persia, where they were known as *sambusak*, serenaded by the ninth century Persian poet Ishaq ibn Ibrahim of Mosul as ‘*this tastiest food for hurried diner-out*’. From Persia, the popular street snack travelled south into Africa and eastwards, changing its name ever so slightly along its path - to *sambuusa* in Somalia, *samosa* in India and Pakistan, *sambusa* in Afghanistan, *somsa* in Tajikistan, and finally *samsa* in Kashgar. The young waitress, dark-eyed and olive-skinned, pointed me to a seat. She filled a teapot with hot water and added a pinch of tea leaves from a tin box. I held up my fingers for three *samsa*. They arrived, puffed and scorched brown, fresh from the oven, smelling of meat and crust. I carefully broke open the first, and the blistered brown skin cracked like a glaze as steam erupted. It was filled with pieces of mutton and glistening morsels of mutton fat with tiny translucent onion pearls. I watched as the men nearby broke off pieces of crust to scoop out the hot filling and did the same, the crust flecked with grains of salt from walls of the *tonur*. The meat was sweet, rich with fat, the crust smoky and charred.

It was only then, as I sat breathing in the smells of another city, that I realised I'd made it. To Kashgar, to the other side of the world, eating *samsa* and drinking

tea. A small swell of pride filled my chest and I took a deep, satisfied breath, realising I was free to do whatever I wanted for the next two weeks. Anything at all. But before the breath had fully expanded it deflated, replaced with the guilt of leaving my husband and children behind, even for a short time. Do mothers ever let go of this guilt?

I glanced at my phone, stuck on Beijing time since my arrival. Still no message from Matt. I wondered what he was doing back home, and tried to calculate the time difference. He had probably finished work for the day and right now might be busy cooking dinner or loading the dishwasher. My mind wandered, and I imagined my kitchen, the long steel-covered work bench, steam rising from pots of water on the stove, the girls buzzing in and out with questions. Or had I miscalculated the time, and Bella and Lily would already be tucked into bed? As I turned all my concentration to the time, Omer's message from the day before returned to me with a jolt. *We will meet 4.30pm local time, which is 6.30pm Beijing time.* In China's far-off capital the banks had now closed for the day, the offices of public servants were shuttered and silent, and all the workers were rushing home for dinner. Although it was still only mid-afternoon in Kashgar, I realised I was about to be late. I burnt my mouth on my last hurried bite of *samsa* as I rushed into the street.

Chapter Two

Bismallah - everything I start, I start in the name of Allah

Islamic prayer before meals

Omer was waiting for me at the ancient North Gate of the Old City, where travellers along the Silk Road arriving from Baghdad or Samarkand, carrying pepper and tea, rice and silver, unburdened their camels and rejoiced at the sight of civilization after months in the desert.

Omer had barely changed. He looked at me with a tender benevolence and patience, perhaps noticing how I had changed since we last saw one another. He looked well, and had shaved off his moustache, revealing full, sensuous lips that made his face appear even younger than its twenty-eight years. But he was as gentle and softly spoken as an old professor. “It’s good to welcome you to Kashgar once more,” he said with a quiet smile. Around us women in jewel-colored dresses rushed to buy bread and vegetables from the cart of a street vendor by the gate. Two men fanned the coals of a charcoal grill, turning kebabs so the fat dripped and hissed, sending fresh plumes of ash smoke and the rich smell of grilled lamb into the air.

Beyond, high on the top of the old city wall, stood a row of adobe houses with doors of blue, ochre, pink and green. These, at least, had evaded demolition because of their prominent position. Climbing the curved road, we searched for the one with the gold door. The door stood ajar on its heavy brass hinges, expecting us, but a lace curtain hid the interior from view. The curtain twitched, then moved aside with a hand. An arm, then a whole woman appeared, smiling in the sunshine. She was middle-aged, her gentle face framed by a brown headscarf patterned with green roses, and with small gold earrings in her ears. She glanced at me without revealing anything in her face, then beckoned us in behind the curtain.

“This is Meryem Henim Mahmut,” said Omer. I moved to shake the woman’s hand before remembering it was inappropriate in Muslim cultures. My hand dropped to my side, useless. I fidgeted with the seam of my trousers, as though that’s what I had intended all along, and smiled. We stood in a narrow atrium inside

the front door, lit by a skylight far above. Meryem Henim Mahmut motioned to us towards the doorway to our left.

“What should I call her?” I whispered to Omer. Names were confusing in China. Surnames came first, followed by first names. Wang Jiawei. Surname Wang, First name Jiawei. But in Uyghur? I wasn’t sure. Was Meryem her first name? Or Mahmut?

“Call her Henim.”

“Henim?” Her middle name?

Omer nodded. “Henim is fine. You can use it for any woman you don’t know well.”

“Like ‘Mrs’ in English?”

Omer shrugged. “Not really. It just means ‘woman’.”

I started to say something, stopped, tried again, stopped again. How could I call this kind Uyghur lady who had just welcomed me into her home, or any woman I didn’t know, ‘woman’? It seemed harsh and impersonal.

“Should I remove my shoes?”

Omer nodded.

We entered in our socks. One of my socks had a hole in the toe that I tried to hide under my foot. I overbalanced, and Omer and Meryem glanced sharply at me before I recovered. Inwardly, I cringed. So much depended on this woman’s first impressions of me. If they were unfavourable, I might leave Kashgar without ever setting foot inside a kitchen. We walked into a square room with ornate plasterwork panels and decorative niches cut into the walls for small vases. The floor was lined corner to corner with overlapping Turkish rugs that curled up towards the walls. I felt their woolly roughness through the hole in my sock, but despite the carpets the room was dim and cold. Meryem Henim switched on the small ceiling light, a bare bulb that gave the room a wan blue glow. I followed Omer’s lead and sat on one of the gilt thread cushions on the floor, stiff, uncertain. Should I tuck my legs underneath, like the woman, or sit cross-legged, like Omer? I tucked. Omer sat facing the door, Meryem Henim to his right, me to his left. Before us a low table sat covered with sweetmeats, bread and fruits. There were dried green kiwifruit slices sticky and shiny as glass, red jujubes, almonds, and sugar crystals set into fancy tiny shapes –hearts, diamonds, spades. A cut-glass pedestal dish held three large rounds

of nan bread, crowned with five glazed sesame rolls, their surface shining and golden. The entire effect was a sparkling display of colour and abundance, but like the varnished food in a doll's house I wasn't sure if any of it was edible.

An awkward silence followed. A young woman appeared in the doorway, slipping off her shoes as she did so. From a brass teapot she poured tea into a small china bowl and passed it to Meryem Henim. She swirled hers around the bowl, like a good wine. But instead of sipping it she tossed the tea onto the carpet in the corner of the room. I looked at Omer, who seemed unbothered. The young woman poured a full bowl now, passing one to Omer and another to me. Was she Meryem's daughter? And was I expected to throw my first bowl of tea in the corner of the room?

I waited for Omer to sip first. He sipped without throwing his tea anywhere. I copied. How I had missed this tea from my last visits to Kashgar! It was the colour of saffron, with tiny crocus pistils and rose petals floating in its fragrant depths. In Kashgar, each day began and ended with tea, each meal was accompanied by and improved by tea, and it was required in every social interaction. Small talk began, stilted at first, then building momentum as Omer established his connections to Meryem's son through a mutual friend. I reached instinctively for a sweet, then pulled my hand back before anyone noticed. Meryem's daughter, for she had now been introduced, poured one more bowl, for her mother. She was about twenty, tall and slender with long, graceful fingers and a serious, dignified manner. Her long skirt swished as she left the room, and she wore a blue and red cardigan buttoned to her neck and a blue headscarf. I tried to imagine her like my eldest daughter Bella, with her hair out long and free, and in jeans and a t-shirt.

I sat watching and listening, waiting for Omer to translate, suppressing my natural inclination to rush into the conversation. Mostly Omer continued speaking without translating at all, as though I wasn't there. I tried to gauge Meryem's opinion by tiny clues in the tone of her voice or her expression, but they seemed contradictory.

I want to learn about Uyghur cooking, I began in my head. By spending time in the kitchen with ordinary women like us, learning how they cook and eat, and how they live.

Meryem spoke in a low voice, as though I might overhear. Only two words were intelligible to me - *Australia* and *doctor*, because they sounded almost identical in English and in Uyghur.

I am an Australian doctor, I continued in my mind, but I have always been just as interested in food and cooking as in medicine.

Now I added Omer's part of the conversation, as I imagined it, presenting me in the best possible light. *Fiona is very trustworthy. Yes, she used to live in China for a time, but she is sympathetic to the Uyghur cause. And yes, she really loves learning about food. Last time she was in Kashgar I arranged for her to learn to make nan bread at the bakery of my old childhood friend Abdrachma. Do you know him? His bakery is in the lane beside the Id Kah Mosque.*

Meryem's daughter dipped in and out, bringing extra platters of dried fruit to add to the untouched luxuries on the table. I thought I heard children's voices upstairs, but couldn't be certain. I sipped my tea slowly to draw it out, warming my cold hands around the bowl, but as soon as the bottom of the bowl appeared, she was there with the brass teapot, refilling. All I could think was how embarrassing it would be if I had to interrupt Omer and Meryem to ask where the bathroom was.

The conversation between them continued. From time to time Meryem looked over at me and smiled, but I couldn't guess what was being discussed, or her feelings towards me, favourable or unfavourable. Perhaps Omer had struggled to give me a good report after all. *She lived in Shanghai for four years. I worry that she might have sympathies with the central government, although she hides it well.*

No one ate. Now they both turned to me.

"She agrees," said Omer.

I sighed inwardly with relief, then smiled, grateful.

"But we only discuss food and cooking."

"Of course."

“She’s worried about any sensitive issues.”

I knew what ‘sensitive issues’ might entail. The potential list had lengthened since my last visit, Omer told me—the banning of Uyghur group gatherings, the restriction of Uyghurs’ movements, the inability to apply for a passport, the banning of beards and headscarves in government offices, the enforcement of Chinese language in schools and kindergartens. Or perhaps Meryem meant the harmonization of Old Kashgar. Were there other sensitive issues, more personal ones, she was also keen to protect?

“Please tell Meryem...” I paused, stumbling over ‘Henim’. I would ask Omer later if I could just use Meryem, her first name. “Please tell Meryem Henim we will only talk about food, and the things she wants to talk about. No sensitive issues.”

Meryem nodded towards me, and said something.

Omer now translated with a slow smile. “She would like you to come upstairs. To the kitchen.”

Meryem’s kitchen was a spare white space overlooking the street. It was wider than it was long, framed on three sides by walls and anchored by a tall arched window over the stove. Winter sunlight slanted across the floor to the sink. The kitchen’s fourth wall was absent, like that in a doll’s house. The floor ended suddenly at the edge of the stairwell, so if you scalded your hand and stepped backwards in fright you might plunge twenty feet to the concrete below.

Meryem lifted a white lace apron from a nail in the wall. As she tied the apron strings over her long brown skirt the formality of the downstairs sitting room dissolved. I seemed to have passed some test, for now Meryem spoke directly to me. If she felt any uncertainty about having a stranger in her kitchen, she had overcome it quickly or was gracious enough not to show it.

“Today, we’re having *laghmannn* noodles, but with a different kind of noodle, a torn noodle,” she said.

Noodle-making was considered a pillar of Uyghur cuisine, and the most important skill a cook needed. I had never seen torn noodles, although I knew a similar dish existed in the culinary lexicon of China’s other Muslim minority, the

Hui Muslims in Gansu Province. They were called ‘small flag noodles’ for their shape.

“I prepared the noodles earlier.”

I was so overjoyed at being asked into her kitchen that it didn’t occur to me to be disappointed that Meryem had already completed most of the preparation in anticipation of our visit. Meryem’s daughter came into the kitchen carrying a cooking pot, the deep black Uyghur pot I later discovered was known as a *kazan*. Behind her two small children huddled, a boy of two and a girl of three or four. Shy, they shadowed her every step as she filled the pot with chill water from the tiny kitchen spigot and placed it on the stove.

The gas hissed blue under the *kazan* as Meryem stood waiting for the water to boil, lost in thought. I studied her face, imagining her thoughts rising in communion with millions of others from women the world over as they waited for water to boil. What was she thinking about? Was it her family; her children and grandchildren? Or her own private worries, the worries of age and health? Perhaps it was just a daydream about the steam rising from the pot, curling about her face, reminding her of other meals on other days. Beside her, the thick noodles she’d made earlier lay ready on a board, like rope coiled on the deck of a ship. Just like Aygul’s noodles, they glistened with oil to prevent them from sticking. Meryem stopped daydreaming and unwound one of the noodles into a long rope. She held it in her left hand, softly, loosely, watching the water. She looped the other end of the long rope over the back of her wrist to prevent it from dangling in the water. As the waters began to bubble furiously Meryem’s hands sprang into action, tearing off pieces of noodle and casting them into the cloud of steam above the pot. The fingers of her right hand pinched and tore the dough, at the same time flattening it into small squares between the curled side of her index finger and her thumb. I imagined it took years of practice to get it right. Each tiny torn square landed with a soft *flp* in the boiling water, like a frog darting into a pond.

Flp, flp, flp.

Her hands continued on their trajectory to the pot, over and over, like feeding out fishing line. The squares sank straight to the bottom of the pot, then rolled gently

upwards to join their fellows basking on the water's surface, plump and pillowy. When Meryem reached the end of the rope she picked up another coiled beside her, and started over without a pause. The movement was mesmerizing, rhythmic, beautiful. It was such a small thing, yet so elegant, so precise in its intention. Meryem's body stood perfectly still as this furious activity unfolded between her hands. Her skin glowed from the steam and the winter sunlight sloping through the arched window over the stove. The children, perhaps sensing the unexpected arrival of an early supper, crept from behind their mother and huddled around Meryem's skirts. But she shooed them away from the boiling water and the pot without breaking stride in the tearing and flattening of noodle squares.

Flp, flp, flp, flp.

The children made a pretence of moving but shuffled in again behind her, their hands creeping out towards their grandmother's skirts, capturing her legs. As the last white square fell into the pot, the smell of cooking noodles filled the upstairs kitchen, familiar and comforting. Meryem leaned across the pot and opened the bottom half of the arched window, just a sliver, to let the steam escape without the cold winter air stealing in. Beside her, she slid the lid from a deep bowl holding the rich, red vegetable sauce that would accompany the noodles. She looked at me and smiled. "Ready to eat?"

Meryem led us now through a heavy burlap curtain into the kitchen sitting room, lined with worn red carpets. It was warm and comfortable, with a coal stove in the corner and cushions on the floor, the only furniture a small cabinet topped with an aged television, its screen polished to a shine. We took our places on the floor around a tablecloth of sorts laid on top of the carpet. There was bread and tea and bowls of fat little noodle squares with a deep red vegetable sauce before us. I breathed in the aromas of tomatoes, peppers, spinach and garlic, and knew immediately I was in the hands of a master. The simple meal of torn noodles and braised vegetables had likely taken hours of careful preparation and held the echoes of hundreds, if not thousands of times it had been practiced before. My chopsticks hovered above the bowl. Meryem gently touched my arm and smiled, her deep grey

eyes looking into mine. “Before the meal we say ‘*bismallah*’. It means ‘*everything I start, I start in the name of Allah*’”

And so we began.

Chapter Three

First Morning Prayer, Fajr: The time for fajr commences with the arrival of true dawn, when the morning light appears across the full width of the sky.

Jami` at-Tirmidhi, sayings of the Prophet Muhammad

I opened the window of my room in the rose-coloured dawn. Blackbirds roosted on the enormous letters spelling out the name of my hotel on the terrace below. The Edge of Heaven Business Hotel. The window shuddered and halted along its track, full of desert grit. At the abrasive sound the gathered black bodies winged away, flying together over old Kashgar, laid out before me as a broad crescent of pink and ochre filled with thousands of individual cells. Their wingbeats faded into silence.

The streets were still empty, devoid of the usual early morning noise of a Chinese city. No cars, no motorbikes, no jackhammers or clanging. No hawkers or hustlers, no people yet going to work. The call to prayer began from the minaret of a green-domed mosque, intensifying the stillness with its mournful notes before they too drifted away, swallowed by the air.

I looked down at my chipped hotel teacup, the sad 'Welcome Guest' teabag floating limply in brown-tinged water. At home, the making of morning tea was my daily ritual, a simple domestic task that set the rhythm of my day. I thought of my own kitchen, of the morning sunshine from the wide open windows while I waited for the electric kettle to boil. Of spooning the dark tea leaves, curled and crisp, into my battered white Bredemeijer pot, an old and faithful friend. It had a perfect pouring spout that never dripped, and its own felt-lined cozy. The hot water hit the leaves with a rush of steam, and I would wait for a minute, watching the mynah birds in the rose gum outside, before I filled the first cup with the clean, earthy smell of freshly brewed tea.

Home. The distance between me and my home was immeasurable. Fifteen hours' flying, even if I could go direct, which I couldn't. I thought again about my children, as I did every few minutes of the day, and felt an ache. It was dawn in Kashgar, which meant it must be 7.30am in Beijing, and 9.30am in Brisbane. They

would already be at school. I sighed. I'd have to wait until this afternoon to call them. I sipped my tea. It tasted faintly of bleach, as though the teabags had been stored with something chemical. I tried phoning Matt, no answer. I didn't leave a message.

Matt. He and I had been together for twenty-six years, most of them happy. We met in a jazz club as second-year university students, me studying medicine, Matt studying fine arts. A mutual friend introduced us. I remember being struck by how handsome he was, and how sweet, tall and slightly goofy. A few days later the same friend invited us both to the dark old house where she lived with her parents and their many cats. My friend stood in the kitchen, surrounded by brown cats and tabby cats, wheezing with asthma and scratching constantly at the patches of eczema on her neck and in her elbow creases. Two Burmese cats strode confidently along the kitchen benches, while another sat licking itself among the plates inside the open dishwasher. I felt vague revulsion. But I remember Matt taking one of the cats gently in his arms and cradling it as you would a baby, and tickling it under the chin until it purred. Something clicked immediately in me. I decided then and there to ditch my equally-handsome but not-serious medical student boyfriend for Matt, who was clearly husband and father material. Not that I was consciously aware, at eighteen, of looking for either of those things.

I called Matt again. This time he answered.

"Hey! How's Kashgar? What time is it?"

"Almost 6am here. How are the girls?"

"Good, all good. Hey, really busy here at work this morning. Can I call you later?"

"Sure," I said.

I loved Matt for his creativity and calm pragmatism, qualities rarely found in tandem. After art school he began an art business, a metal foundry, and one of the first things he created was an immense wrought iron bed with wild curving bedheads and curlicued bed knobs. He spent every weekend at work forging and hammering until it was finished, then four men were needed to carry it into our tiny house in pieces and assemble it in the bedroom. Nobody had ever made such a large and

impressive gift for me, and I tried to live up to it with grilled fish and slow-cooked beef and a hundred small delicious things. When Matt and I had been together for ten years the bed was still standing and Matt still ate everything I cooked for him. We decided to get married, a mutual decision without a proposal, an engagement ring, a white wedding or a grand declaration. I considered us very modern, very feminist and quietly congratulated myself on finding a truly emancipated men. I kept my name. But afterwards the wedding photos stayed in their box, never opened, as though best forgotten.

When I thought about my second meeting with Meryem later that morning I felt uncertain. She was still a stranger to me, and I to her. She might yet change her mind about having a foreigner in her home every day and the additional scrutiny to which it might expose her. There were subtle and not-so-subtle signs all was not well in Kashgar, signs I wanted to talk about with Matt - an increased police presence, a feeling of tension in the street. The Edge of Heaven Hotel stood next to People's Square, opposite a giant sandstone statue of Chairman Mao. His arm was raised, as if waving to a distant friend, and below his feet a broad red banner proclaimed the sixty year anniversary of China's ethnic unity as a nation. What was unexplained was why such unity required the presence of twenty police vans, three riot vehicles, and black-uniformed police gathering in groups across the square, long truncheons in their hands. I felt uneasy, very uneasy. Some kind of trouble was brewing and I didn't want to bring any to Meryem.

But Omer soothed my worries when he collected me in his van after breakfast.

"She wouldn't have said it was okay for her, if it wasn't okay," Omer reasoned.

"There are a lot more police here than last time I visited."

"There are, but they're not interested in a woman cooking."

"And me?" I asked.

"As a foreigner they have no right to touch you. You are not the problem for them."

The problem for them, the Chinese Government, was that the Uyghurs in Kashgar and its surrounds occupied land bordering China's most troublesome neighbours: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tibet. The area had been contested for centuries as a crucial link in the overland trade routes between Europe and China, and the Uyghurs had long been vocal about an independence that would pose a direct threat to Beijing. Instead the government responded with a slow chokehold on Uyghur freedoms, in order to maintain control.

Back inside her house, Meryem (for I now had permission to call her that) explained that the family always ate their substantial meal at midday, with a smaller meal in the evenings. If I wanted to learn about Uyghur cooking I would need to be there straight after breakfast, when the work of lunch began. Meryem spread a green fringed tablecloth on the floor of the warm kitchen sitting room as she introduced her daughter Fatima - the same daughter we had met yesterday, and her grandchildren Ayesha and her brother Zubadam, hiding behind Fatima's skirts. On the cloth Fatima spread a modified version of the dollhouse feast from yesterday. Bread again, but this time without the cut-glass dish, and three small bowls holding almonds, walnuts, and fresh green grapes from Turpan, northeast of Kashgar.

"This is *gizek*," Meryem explained. "It's the Uyghur way to welcome guests."

I wondered if *gizek* was ever intended to be eaten, or instead represented a promise of food to come.

"The amount of *gizek* shows your generosity," Omer explained. "For a special occasion it has to look very big, very impressive."

So *gizek* was a feast for the eyes, a visual barometer of the host's hospitality and wealth. In the supermarket near my hotel I would discover an entire department devoted to *gizek*, shelves of sweets and candied fruits, drums filled with coloured crystal sugar, ribboned boxes of biscuits, foil-wrapped sweets. But this time, in the kitchen sitting room, everyone ate. Meryem tore the bread and passed pieces to me.

In return, I presented her with a box of Australian macadamia nuts dipped in chocolate, tied with purple ribbon. She seemed pleased. I felt embarrassed, I should have brought it with me the day before as a show of goodwill. It had been difficult to know what might have been an appropriate gift - a scarf seemed too personal, a book

too heavy to carry across the world. I felt remiss for not having brought anything for the children, who touched the purple ribbon with careful fingers. We sat, warmed by the cast iron stove squatting on its short legs in the corner of the room. Coal glowed in its belly. The round lid of the stove was made of concentric rings that adjusted the aperture of the stovetop, interlocking from largest to smallest. Fatima used a metal hook to remove rings so a larger pot could sit on the stove, or to replace rings to accommodate the smaller teapot. The top of the stove was constantly busy with the clank of metal rings, off, on, off, on, bigger, smaller, bigger, smaller.

When the water had boiled (clank, clank) and the teapot warmed (clank, clank, clank) Meryem made the tea with a pinch of leaves from a screw top jar on the windowsill. Mine was the first bowl poured, followed by Omer, then Fatima. We sat and sipped, warmed by the stove. The children clamoured for tea too. Ayesha and her little brother Zubadam received a splash each in plastic bowls. Satisfied, they pointed to the sweets in the centre of the cloth, imploring Omer for an almond, then a few grapes. Meryem served herself last, and rearranged her legs to make herself comfortable. It struck me how few of my friends would sit quietly with a cup of tea before cooking a meal. When did our lives become too busy for sitting still? Instead we hurried from task to task, clutching our phones and our cardboard coffee cups.

After tea, Meryem replaced the green tablecloth with a red-patterned cloth bundle, textured and heavy. Wrapped inside was a cleaver, a heavy wooden board, a vibrant bunch of spinach tied with rough brown string, tomatoes and potatoes. She must have already visited the market before our arrival.

“What are you cooking today?”

“Today, we’re having *laghmannn*, a pulled noodle,” Meryem said, placing each item with precision on the opened red cloth. Fatima brought a bowl filled with flour and another with water.

“Pulled noodles?” I asked. In Gansu Province, where they originated, men stood over huge pots of boiling water with skeins of noodles between their hands, pulling them into finer and finer threads. There, they were called by their Chinese name, *la mian*. The Uyghur name, *laghmannn*, probably shared the same origin.

Meryem nodded. “We make it at home, not so much in a restaurant, because it takes too long.”

I had seen them made once before, with Aygul, on my first visit to Kashgar six years before, when she pulled the noodles like skeins of wool wrapped around both her hands, until they became finer and finer strands.

“Do you use a recipe?” I asked.

She laughed. “No, I don’t use any recipes or cookbooks. But Miraldijan told me he’ll bring me a cookbook if I want.” Miraldijan was the elder of her two sons. She laughed again. “I told him I can cook without books! I’m no beginner!” It was lovely to see Meryem laugh, after the seriousness of the previous day’s meeting. Her soft face became firm and young again when she laughed, and her eyes shone.

She began the dough, adding water from a different tea kettle to the flour with her left hand, while mixing with her right.

Omer once told me his mother made noodles every single day of the year. Bread was outsourced to bakers, but noodles were made at home, always by women. “How did you first learn to make noodles?” I asked Meryem.

“My mother-in-law taught me,” she said. “I got married at nineteen, and at the time I couldn’t cook. I was the youngest of seven children in the family – five girls and two boys. My sisters cooked everything so I didn’t learn. When I got married I couldn’t even make dough!”

Dough was the nucleus of most Uyghur dishes: pulled noodles, torn noodles, fine noodles, fat noodles, steamed bread, baked bread, *manta*, *samsa*. It was an essential first step in learning to cook any dish. Although I didn’t appreciate it on my first visit to Kashgar many years before, each dough was subtly but vitally different in its creation. Good noodles depended less on the skill of being able to pull them into strands, which was a showy magic trick almost anyone could learn, and more on the perfect dough, with the exact balance of flour, salt and water, and the correct amount of both kneading and resting.

Meryem began to knead the still-ragged mixture into a smooth ball, her hands working independently as she chatted. “How much you knead the dough means you get a beautiful noodle.”

Fatima returned to the room with a small jar filled with a gritty white-grey grains in a clear liquid.

“It’s salt and water.” Meryem gave the mixture a good stir then took a small spoonful of the watery salt and incorporated it into her kneading. “Salt makes the noodles strong, so they don’t break.”

She continued. “My mother-in-law set me up in a separate room. My dough sometimes had too much salt, sometimes too little, and this is how I learned.” Dough mastery, by trial and error.

“She was a good teacher?”

“My mother-in-law was very kind, teaching me. We lived with them about two and a half years, and by the time we got our own house I could cook all kinds of meals. If I said I couldn’t do something, my mother-in-law said ‘yes you can’ and slowly I learned to make it.”

I thought of my own mother-in-law. As a mother of four boys and teacher in an all-boys school, she’d taught me many things - how to handle yourself in a world full of men, how to fight the right battles. But cooking was not something I learned from her. She cooked simply and plainly, and nourished herself in other ways - with crosswords and sudoku puzzles and good books. My mother had taught me to cook, allowing me to make errors and try again. My early attempts - fudge, toffee, meringues - were frequently disastrous. I lacked the strength and skill to whisk egg whites properly and my meringues emerged from the oven as disappointingly flattened discs, not the twirled confections I imagined they would be. But my mother let me keep trying until my little arms grew the necessary muscles to manage the handle of the rotary beaters. From there I moved on to biscuits, then cakes, learning to follow a recipe correctly, and by twelve I had made my way right through the Women’s Weekly Cookbook series - Italian, Chinese, Sweet Favourites, and Dinner Parties 1 and 2.

Meryem took the dough now and used her cleaver to cut it into portions. Each was oiled a little, rolled into a thick rope, then coiled again in a spiral. She rested each coil under a cloth on her cutting board. “After we moved into our own house my mother-in-law visited one day. She said, ‘You cook better than me!’” Meryem laughed a full, happy laugh.

“How about Fatima?” I asked. “When did she learn to make dough?”

Meryem pressed the back of her knuckles to her hips, splaying her oily fingers away from her so they didn’t touch her clothes. “Fatima was married at eighteen and she could already cook.” A look of pride passed over her face. “I taught her everything. I was afraid she would be nervous when she went to her parents-in-law’s house, like I was. So I trained her.”

I had never been nervous about cooking in front of my parents-in-law. When we first met, Matt used to joke about the time that his mother served all four of her boys scoops of frozen margarine, thinking it was homemade ice cream they sometimes froze inside old margarine tubs. Or her infamous Garbage Soup, made from whatever unmentionables were left in the vegetable crisper at the end of the week. Sunday nights had always been ‘mucko’ for as long as he could remember, a food free-for-all with every man for himself. Because I had learned to cook so young, the kitchen was one room in the house in which I had always felt completely at ease, comfortable and confident that whatever I made would be tasty and appreciated. In the kitchen of my parents-in-law I felt like a maestro, the crushing lack of confidence in other aspects of my life, like my work and, sometimes, my marriage, never bothered me when I was happy chopping and cooking.

In Kashgar Fatima’s children came bustling into the room, busy with a piece of string. They were still unsure of me, and skirted around the far side of the room to their mother. Fatima made excited noises and pretended to be overjoyed by the string they presented her. I watched as she patiently and expertly kept them from fighting one another, making a mess, or disturbing the peace. Meryem turned her attention to the remaining ingredients - two tomatoes, two potatoes, the bunch of spinach and a quarter green cabbage, with a few cloves of garlic and a tiny piece of mutton, for flavor.

“Now we make the *say*, the vegetables.” She chopped each ingredient with great care and precision, using her cleaver. It was fine and decorative, its bone handle inlaid with copper. The Uyghurs excelled at metalwork of all kinds, but knife making was a particularly prized skill. “If two of us are cooking, one could prepare vegetables and another one work the noodles, but if there’s one cook then we make the thick noodle coils and let the dough rest while we cook the vegetables.”

Now she stood, groaning a little as her legs straightened for the first time in an hour. She and Fatima together carried the cutting board with the mutton, vegetables and noodles to the kitchen. “I always cook with my daughter. Sometimes I don’t even cook and just let her cook, if I’m feeling under the weather.”

As they moved through the heavy burlap curtain of the kitchen sitting room the cold rushed at my face, but we were soon warming ourselves by the black *kazan* on the kitchen stove. Meryem added the finely chopped mutton, garlic, potatoes and tomatoes to the dark green oil in the pot. The vegetables hissed and then softened, and the garlic smell turned from acrid to sweet. To these Meryem added a spoonful of her own red pepper paste, *kizil laza*, and the oil in the pot turned a rich, dark red while the sweet scent of roasted peppers filled the room. The paste added a desirable red colour to the vegetables, and a sweet flavour with a little chilli heat. Lastly, Meryem tossed the vibrant green spinach leaves and stems in the *kazan*, and they wilted and softened with the other vegetables.

Meryem set the vegetable braise aside now, and Fatima replaced it with a pot of cold water. We stood waiting once more for the water to boil. Meryem moved the thick ropy coil of noodles towards her. She took one end and stretched it gently between her hands, like spooling off yarn, until the noodle was half as thick and twice as long. She looped the noodles around both of her hands and stretched her arms apart until the pale, smooth noodles thinned and lengthened, finer and longer. They looked impossibly thin, but in Meryem's hands none snapped or broke. She doubled the skein back over her hands in a single, graceful motion before stretching them one last time, even finer again, and lowering them deftly into the pot. She didn't speak as she did this, her face calm and composed, her hands and arms moving in a gentle ballet. It was like watching a meditation, one in which the focus was the feel and tension of the noodles.

Meryem emerged from her reverie, as though suddenly woken. The noodles cooked in seconds and she drained them in the sink, steam filling the kitchen in hot billows. With care she took a handful of the scalding-hot noodles and coiled each in a small bowl, as though her fingers weren't burning. Fatima spooned the red and green vegetable braise over the top. As we ate, I understood the garlic and *kizil laza* to be key, bringing a sweet intensity to the sauce to complement the clean taste of the noodles, even and fine, like vermicelli. When I slurped the noodles the carmine-coloured sauce left a red stain on my lips.

Chapter Four

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

Aristotle

My days began to trace a pattern - the rose-coloured dawn, tea, *samsa* for breakfast, then to meet Omer at Meryem's house. So far I had learned to make *laghmannn* hand-pulled noodles, fine as threads or thick as your finger, and the rich red vegetable sauce, *soman*, that accompanied them. I had helped make dumplings and breads, sharp vinegar-dressed salads, and rich chickpea and mutton soups. These were the everyday foods of a Uyghur family in Kashgar. I had taken to having an early breakfast at the *samsa* restaurant, sitting outside in the pale winter sunshine and watching the Old City come to life. Every morning lines of police on quad bikes patrolled the narrow lanes of the Old City, conga-like. The officers, two-by-two with truncheons strapped to their backs, sat stiff and upright, vigilant, watching. I watched my fellow customers, and the bakers tending the ovens. Most turned away, deliberately ignoring the police. The *samsa* baker and his assistant exchanged a glance, in equal parts fear and resignation, before turning their attention back to their ovens.

Every Chinese-owned building in Kashgar, including my hotel, was now barricaded and guarded. The main door of the Edge of Heaven Hotel was bolted closed. The new entry, via a narrow side door, funnelled me directly through a metal detector. As I passed through it alarmed with a barrage of short, shrill beeps, but the Chinese security guard sitting behind a desk waved me through. Kashgar's largest supermarket, Chinese-owned, was near the hotel. The entrance was barricaded by a solid metal barrier, and outside were five soldiers with automatic weapons, another metal detector gate, and an x-ray conveyor belt for bags. A Uyghur woman manned the conveyor belt, presumably looking for knives, guns and bombs. I held up my handbag, but her heart wasn't in it and she waved me through without processing. As a foreigner I was not a visible threat. The previous day I'd walked into the China Construction Bank to change money carrying two dozen metal kebab skewers I bought on Coppersmith's Street. They were as long and lethal as swords, but nobody questioned me as I set off metal detectors left and right. Inside the supermarket I marvelled again at the *gizek* display, and had a long conversation in Chinese with a

Uyghur assistant about washing detergents and stain removers. This was her section of the supermarket and she was keen to make a sale, but I only wanted to buy the smallest size of everything, even if it didn't represent terribly good value. As I left, past the first, then second metal detectors, past the soldiers in combat gear, and finally back through the metal detector at the Edge of Heaven, I left a trail of strident beeping behind me.

But in Meryem's house those things disappeared. Our world was no bigger than the kitchen, the stove, and the cooking pot.

"What will you make today?" I asked.

"*Manta*," Meryem replied. Steamed dumplings, filled with mutton. In the warm kitchen sitting room Meryem sat cross-legged next to the stove, spreading a red-patterned cloth before her. She produced a piece of mutton wrapped in paper, and a bunch of green-tipped chives, then reached behind the stove for a bundle wrapped in a heavy cloth. She always managed to buy her ingredients before we arrived. I imagined her at one of the street butchers in the old city, the ones I had seen carving sides of fat-tailed sheep to order. Sometimes a sheep was tied forlornly outside, in case business proved brisk and the butcher needed more mutton in a hurry.

"Here's the dough," she said. "I made it before you came because it takes a long time to rise."

I sighed, very softly. No doubt Meryem felt it was better to prepare in advance but I felt disappointed to miss important steps.

She unfolded the layers like unswaddling a baby; the dark heavy cloth, an embroidered white cloth, then a heavy plastic sheet. "If the dough is well-risen, we get a good soft *manta*. If it doesn't rise well the *manta* are a bit tough."

Meryem laid the dough on the broad wooden board and began to flatten and stretch it with her fingers and knuckles. Fatima slid into the room, her slight frame barely disturbing the burlap curtain. Today she wore a light blue headscarf and a silver sweater over her long blue skirt, but Meryem dressed as before - a sage cardigan, a long brown skirt, a floral headscarf. Her uniform. Fatima sat opposite her mother, observing, then her hands joined in to stretch the dough towards her until the board was covered by an rough rectangle of dough. Meryem took a cup of dark green oil and smoothed it over the flattened dough, where it collected in the furrows

and dents left by her fingers. I thought it might be hemp seed oil, with its nutty, grassy flavour, but it had no English or even a Chinese name.

Starting at the edge of the board closest to her, Meryem lifted the dough and rolled it into a thick cylinder. This she divided into a dozen pieces, then twisted them into scrolls and flattened them into circles the size of a small saucer. It was a curious method, but by rolling, twisting, and flattening, the oil created light layers within the dough as it cooked, like flaky pastry. Meryem set the dough circles aside. She unwrapped the mutton and a piece of firm white mutton fat, and chopped them finely together. Fatima took the chives, delicately removing the transparent outer membrane from the bare white stalks with her long fingernails. Meryem chopped the stalks too, and the bright garlicky smell filled the room. She added them to the mutton with a little salt. Now into each dough circle went a pinch of mutton and chives, folded and sealed to make an oval dumpling. Meryem and Fatima developed a rhythm between them, their long, supple fingers gleaming with oil as they placed the *manta* carefully in a steamer basket. As any cook who has ever attempted dumplings will know, they are a provocation. The filling always tries to spill out, the edges of the dough never stay sealed, and they burst their sides during cooking if the dough is stretched too thinly. My own kitchen was littered with my dumpling failures, until I learned to stop making them with my eyes and instead surrendered to the feel of the dumpling in my hands, knowing whether the weight in my palm meant the filling should be more or less, allowing one hand to cup and hold the dumpling while the other pleated, tucked and folded. It was a much more successful method.

Fatima served tea to warm our hands, then settled herself in the far corner with Ayesha and Zubadam. I had been to the night market after leaving Meryem's house the previous day and bought gifts for the children—white plastic rabbits whose ears flashed different colours, their bellies covered with small plastic buttons. Ayesha and Zubadam were beside themselves. They held the rabbits reverentially, eyes wide, mouths open in surprise as each button revealed a new joy—Uyghur songs, Uyghur children's stories, a recitation of the Uyghur alphabet. Ayesha pressed the buttons carefully, waiting for each recording to finish before pressing another. Zubadam pressed all the buttons at once, as many as his fingers could

manage. His rabbit stuttered into a song, like a record player starting up at the wrong speed, then jack-knifed into the alphabet before jerking into song again. I felt it might short circuit and start sparking at any moment, but instead Its ears flashed violently; red, purple, orange, blue, red.

Fatima's husband was away for his work, so Fatima and the children had come to stay with her mother until he returned. I still hadn't met their grandfather, Meryem's husband, but it transpired he was out of town. Meryem rarely brought her husband up in conversation, and I had never heard her say his name.

"On business," Omer told me. I wasn't sure if it was a euphemism, or indeed, what it might be a euphemism for.

"Does your husband cook?" I asked Meryem.

Her laughter filled the tiny room. "No! He's never cooked once! He only knows how to do business and make money!" She shook her head, still giggling. "His mother did everything for him when I met him. He couldn't even fetch his own socks."

I looked blankly at Meryem.

Omer laughed at me. "If you *can't fetch your own socks* it means you're not very independent." A Uyghur saying for helplessness.

"And what is his name?" I asked.

"In Uyghur culture women never use their husbands' names," Omer told me. They just say 'my husband'."

"Even at home in private?" I asked.

"Even at home."

I imagined applying this to my own life. "My husband is away in the Middle East on business," I might say, which was increasingly true. Or, "My husband would die of starvation if I left him," usually followed by laughter and recognition in other women. But mostly I used his real name, Matt, and would never have thought to call out "My husband!" if I was searching for him around the house. Matt meant solidity, and reliability, and kindness, and love. That's what Matt meant.

"Tell me about your wedding Omer," I said.

Omer had been married a few years before. "The wedding itself lasted for two days. The imam came, then the families visited each other, then other guests

visited. At the end of the first day, my family and I collected my wife from her house with fancy cars, musicians, drums and trumpets, and took her to my house, her new home.”

Weddings were still, at that time, immune from Chinese government interference. Every night in Kashgar I heard exuberant bridal processions in the streets below. The men sat in the back of an open tray utility, one beating a huge kettle drum held between his knees, one with a smaller drum, one playing a kind of wild trumpet. The bride’s car travelled behind, festooned with long lacy ribbons, huge bows and lace rosettes on the front, rear, and all the doors. I felt a surge of pure joy every time I heard one. The groom and his entourage followed in further extravagantly decorated cars, and the entire procession was filmed by a cameraman balancing carefully in the back of the utility.

“What did you eat?”

“We had a very special kebab, and soup, and many sweets on the wedding table—dried fruits, nuts, rock sugar, sweet fried noodles, candies from Turkey, Iran and the Middle East,” Omer told me. I imagined Omer’s bridal *gizek*, a table collapsing under the weight of sugared fancies.

“Was yours the same?” I asked Meryem.

She drank the last sip of her tea and handed her bowl to Fatima for more. “My family arranged my wedding.” This was not surprising, in Uyghur culture most marriages were arranged.

“Did it take long to choose a husband?”

“Sometimes it takes time until the two families decide on a suitable husband or wife. Some families get along easily and decide quickly. Our marriage was arranged in a month. My parents and brothers and sisters were all involved in the decision.”

I asked the question I was burning to know. “Did you get to meet him before your wedding?”

Meryem shook her head. “At that time, meeting your future husband was uncommon. But our parents decided they would let us see each other. My father was a baker, and his shop was next to the main road. I went to the bakery and saw him standing beside the road.”

Her voice betrayed no hint of whether she found that first glance appealing, and I searched her face for clues. None.

I raised my eyebrows, as if to say “And?”

“I only saw him that one time, then ran back to the house.”

Meryem would have just turned seventeen at that point, her whole life ahead of her. What had she dreamt her future would hold? And might she have seen any of it in the face of her future husband?

We sat together silently for a moment. I was lost in thought about my own marriage. Would my parents have made a better choice for me, if that had been the norm in my culture? What kind of man might they have chosen? Would he have been anything like Matt?

“How long have you been married now?” I asked.

“Thirty-one years,” said Meryem, looking straight at me with her pale grey eyes.

I wavered under her unflinching gaze. “Do you think your parents made a good choice?”

Now Meryem hesitated a beat before answering. “Father got me out of school and I got married. That’s what it was like during my time.” The statement had a certain finality, and I understood the topic was closed.

Meryem moved towards the steamer.

“They’re ready.”

But all evening I imagined my own father telling me I had to leave school at seventeen to be married.

Meryem’s youngest son, Mirsa, joined us for lunch for the first time. He was slight, with a furtive manner and prominent ears, and had come from his job at a nearby shop.

“Mirsa, this is Fiona.” Mirsa barely glanced at me. “Fiona, Mirsa.”

Meryem handed each of us a bowl filled with steaming *manta*, asking Mirsa questions, receiving brief answers. Yes, the shop had been quiet in the morning. No, he hadn’t seen Mrs So-and-So in the shop. Yes, he had remembered to lock up properly before he came for lunch. Mirsa sat opposite me, wolfing down whole dumplings into his thin mouth, but he didn’t catch my eye again, staring at the tablecloth in front of him. The way Meryem questioned him and he responded had something of the defiant child in it, but Omer was so busy eating I was interpreting

based only on his body language, and quickly admonished myself for jumping to judgement.

The manta were plump and fluffy, the tops of each flecked with scatterings of escaped chive. The sign of true masters of technique, none of Fatima's nor Meryem's dumplings had burst their skins. After prayers, Fatima carefully split her manta open, releasing a shot of steam. She tore off small pieces, piping hot, and dipped them in a mixture of dark rice vinegar and dried red chilli before feeding them to the children. The dough was light yet rich thanks to the oil, the mutton inside pink and glistening, perfectly salted. The chives lent a herb sweetness. We ate slowly and sipped our tea. Mirsa left as soon as the after-lunch prayer of thanks was spoken and Meryem's eyes followed him from the room. She turned back, the worry on her face replaced quickly with a smile.

"Fiona, Omer, eat some more," she said, filling our bowls with more manta.

Each afternoon, Omer and I returned to the hotel to start the translation/transcription process. It had been very difficult, at first, to get him to translate on the fly. He preferred to listen to Meryem's whole response, sometimes replying or adding a question of his own, then provide a one sentence summary of several minutes of dialogue. "She was talking about the dough." "She spoke about her son." In the hotel lobby we listened to the audio recording I had Meryem's permission to make each day, and Omer translated word-for-word so I could capture the details of each dish. The first ten minutes of translation took over an hour. The Edge of Heaven guests came and went, and no one seemed to pay us any mind. But at one point Omer scanned the lobby suspiciously.

"Fiona – I feel uncomfortable here. Is there somewhere else we can go? Maybe the restaurant?"

We tried the hotpot restaurant, but it had several loud, drunk Chinese guests eating a late lunch.

"Perhaps your room?" Omer suggested. I would have offered this earlier but felt keenly the possible impropriety of the arrangement. A married Western woman, a married Muslim man.

But in my room it was much easier – easier to hear and much faster. In order to remain above board, we always kept the door open. The housekeeper’s office was across the hallway, and cleaning staff walked in and out, collecting mops and buckets and fresh towels. They always glanced in my door and then did a double-take, perhaps imagining Omer and I as an odd couple.

But that afternoon there was also a man, a dark-suited figure strolling back and forth, lacking the purposeful strides of the housekeepers. Who was he? I hadn’t seen him before.

Every day, in the quiet half hour after lunch at Meryem’s house, we sat and drank tea next to the stove. At these times Meryem loved to talk about the special foods cooked for religious celebrations like Eidh, marking the end of Ramadan. Her face always became animated talking about these happy family times.

“During Eidh we cook *samsa* and sweet fried bread twists, *mahu*. We buy *gizek*, as much as possible - dates, biscuits, dried fruits! We slaughter a sheep and make *kebab* of the liver and kidney. Then we cook the lamb, one piece for everyone, and make fried vegetables with noodles, and dumpling soup.”

Fatima settled the children for a sleep in their ornate wooden cribs. They resembled, more than anything else, fancy wooden tool caddies with small feet. Ayesha, almost four, climbed into hers without protest, lying on layers of frilled and decorative bedding in the wooden tray of the crib, just wider and longer than her body. Her legs were covered with a broad fabric strip, wound around so she couldn’t move or bend them, then tightened underneath the crib by a string that wound up tied to the crib’s top rail. A second strap lay across her chest and right arm, but her left was allowed free and she rested it beside her. The chest band was also tightened, and its string joined the other tied to the crib’s long handle. Fatima carefully placed a blanket over the top, making a dark, cosy tent underneath. She rocked the crib gently and Ayesha fell asleep within minutes. Zubadam was not so straightforward. He fought sleep all the way. Fatima tucked in his two-year-old legs, but when she moved to his chest he worked both legs free, kicking and bucking. She patiently soothed him until his legs were under control again only to have both arms pummel her with tiny punches. Sometimes, like today, faced with his mother’s implacable nature, he gave in. But at other times he became incensed, wailing angrily until

Fatima carried his crib to a dark side room. I don't know what magic she wove there, but the wailing soon stopped.

Meryem watched, smiling wistfully. Was she remembering her own children at that age? She spoke very often of her eldest, Miraldijan, of what he had been like as a child - responsible, studious, caring. Now he was successful and independent, recently married, his wife expecting a child.

"We have a video disc here somewhere, of the celebration for Miraldijan's *sunetoy*."

"Sunetoy?" I asked Omer.

"Yes, circumcision," said Omer.

"You have a special celebration for...?" I was about to say *circumcision*, but stopped myself. Was it indelicate?

"Yes," said Meryem, "We held *sunetoy* for Meraldijan, when he was ten years old. We slaughtered a cow."

My eyes widened. This would have been an impressive expense for the family.

Meryem continued, lost in a joyful memory filled with food. "And fresh fruits, melons, jam, *polo*, *korama* and *kebob*." Fruits, meat dishes and kebabs.

"And the boys?" I asked Omer. "How do they feel about *sunetoy*?" I imagined a terrified Miraldijan watching a cow being slaughtered and realising he was next.

Omer nodded enthusiastically. "Usually boys love it. They receive many, many gifts."

Meryem's face changed suddenly, like she had been struck. "In the video, my parents-in-law were alive and my sisters were all there." Her eyes brimmed with tears. "Now they're dead."

Sometimes Meryem spoke of Mirsa, her troubled youngest son. He had been eating lunch with us since the day we made *manta*, returning to the shop each afternoon.

"Miraldijan had to finish school early, because we couldn't afford his education." Meryem sighed. "He loved studying and was good at school. But he said

to Mirsa, ‘I can’t continue studying, but maybe you can.’ He bought so many books for Mirsa.”

I thought of the sometimes surly Mirsa. He didn’t seem like the studying kind.

“But Mirsa didn’t study. He was always absent from school and the teachers would come to the house to find him.” Meryem shook her head slowly, pouring more hot water from the kettle into the teapot. The afternoon sun filtered through the lace curtains at the only window, making patterns on the Turkish carpets on the floor. She adjusted her headscarf a little, tucking in a few wisps of escaping light brown hair touched with grey. “We arranged an apprenticeship for Mirsa at a barbershop for a year. Where there are people, there are always bakers, and barbers. A guaranteed job.” She sighed. “But he couldn’t get along with the other apprentices. After he learned to be a barber, he didn’t turn up to work when he was supposed to. His employer called us to complain, to find out where he was.”

Fatima returned to check on the children. She lifted Zubadam’s blanket tentatively, but he was asleep. Would he later cause her heartache and trouble?

“Mirsa convinced us he needed his own barber shop,” Meryem continued. Fatima listened, remaining in the room. “We used all our money to arrange such a shop.” Meryem scratched at an invisible mark on her skirt. “Then he didn’t work hard. The shop failed.” Her face fell. “Oh, Allah.” Her *Oh, Allah* sounded the way you might say *Oh, boy*.

Meryem’s family were not wealthy. Their house, although in prime location on the edge of the Old City, was inherited from her husband’s family. Inside there was almost no furniture, and very few other possessions. The cost of buying a business in the hope of helping their son succeed, only to have it fail again, would have cast a heavy burden not only on Meryem and her husband, but on Fatima and Miraldijan too.

“My eldest Miraldijan is a good man. He’s good at managing relationships with our relatives. He has a very good mind, very kind. If there’s any problem, we discuss it with Miraldijan. He doesn’t smoke, he doesn’t drink alcohol. I hope Allah may help him. If I’m depressed, he’ll come and talk to me to make me feel better.” The invisible mark persisted, and Meryem scratched at it firmly. “But Mirsa is like

the bad boy of the family. We spoiled him.” Meryem looked at me now, her face filled with the pain of knowing she and her husband had backed the wrong horse.

Perhaps Mirsa knew acutely that he wasn't his mother's favourite, and it wore away at him. Or maybe he felt the burden of having the family's hard-earned money spent on him, only to lose it. Yet he came every single day to eat his mother's cooking for lunch, and have a conversation with her, however brief. I could see Meryem's disappointment, but more than that, her bewilderment. She had tried everything she knew how to try with Mirsa, and still it hadn't worked. I turned back to the brass teapot beside us on the floor, lacking the words I wanted to say to her in her own language.

Instead, I poured her a cup. “What are your hopes Meryem?” I asked, . “For your children and grandchildren?”

It was a question I expected her to answer in the same way as many parents – a wish for her children to be happy and healthy, a hope for her grandchildren to grow up without struggle. Meryem began to weep, quietly, tears running down her soft cheeks. Fatima was still in the other room, Ayesha and Zubadam were asleep next to us. “My wish for my children is that they live better lives than me. I really hope so, may Allah help.”

My own children were still too young to cause such heartbreak. Lily was eleven, Bella had just turned fifteen. Bella, being the oldest, was a responsible rule follower, while Lily liked to test my limits to see how far they could be pushed. I thought about them and how far I was from them. With the time difference it was often difficult to catch the girls at the right time of day. If there was enough credit on my phone I called them from Meryem's house during a cooking break, but the reception was dreadful.

“Are you there Lil?”

“ — ”

“Lil? Can you hear me?”

“Mum! I'm here.”

“I couldn't hear you.”

“I know, you keep saying.”

“Anyway, how was school?”

“Good.”

“Any exciting news?”

“No. Not really.”

“How’s Bella?”

“Good.”

“Can I have a chat with her?”

“BEL-LA!! MUM WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!” Lily called through our house on the other side of the world at full volume. “BEL-LA!”

“Before Bella gets here Mum, I have a question for you. Do you think we should take Alfie to the farm this weekend?” Alfie was our ginger cat, and the farm was Matt’s parents’ place, three hundred kilometres away.

“No, I don’t think a three-hour car trip will be something Alfie would enjoy.”

Bella arrived breathless to the phone. “Hi Mum.” She’d probably run upstairs.

“Hi gorgeous. How are you?”

“Pretty good.”

“How are things at home?” This was a coded question for “How is Dad managing with the cooking and school activities?”

“Pretty good.”

There was a pause from both of us. Teenagers were hard to chat with. They doubtless felt the same about parents.

“Tell Lily I said bye.”

“I will.”

“Love you. Miss you.”

“Love you too. Miss you.”

“Bye.”

On those days I missed them until my heart ached.

Outside the safe warmth of Meryem’s kitchen, the situation in Kashgar seemed to be worsening. Groups of police and soldiers in bulletproof vests clustered on corners, weapons in hands. Armoured riot vehicles stood in boxy metal rows outside

my hotel. Rumours circulated about Uyghur “re-education camps” in the desert for young men who were deemed problematic, without any clear definition of what this meant. Something had shifted, but what? Had there been a terrorist attack? It was quite possible, likely even, that the Chinese government was suppressing information, either about an attack or a planned retaliation. I seemed to be the only foreigner in Kashgar too, which was most unusual. What did everyone else know that I didn’t?

That afternoon police intercepted a group of young men skylarking near my hotel. They were teenagers, goofing around, giving each other piggyback rides, laughing and joking. Until the police approached. Then they stood in line, four heads bowed, and silently offered their identity cards for scrutiny. Their bodies cowed, as though shamed. The police took one boy away, and his friends dissolved rapidly into the crowd in opposite directions.

“Increased security is common this year,” Omer said. “Ever since Tiananmen Square.” Three Uyghur separatists had taken their fight to Beijing and ploughed through Tiananmen Square in a petrol-filled car, killing two and injuring many.

As I passed People’s Square on my way home from Meryem’s house, a monolithic Chairman Mao in a long overcoat waved to invisible admirers. Under his feet a broad red banner celebrated the sixty-year anniversary of ethnic unity in far west China. I thought back to the sign inside the Old City. *All ethnic groups live friendly together here.* A Uyghur woman in a red coat, her hair covered by a green scarf, hurried past me with her two children. She glanced up, her face furrowed with worry, and caught my eye. She was surprised, seeing my face, but quickly returned her gaze to the ground in front of her as she rushed to the far side of the square.

This was not the city I knew. This was a city under siege, a hostile occupation by its own government. I discussed it again with Omer, in private. “I’ve noticed Kashgar is very ...different. From last time. From last week actually.”

He nodded, tight-lipped. “It is. Much has changed.” He looked away briefly. Then turned back with a smile, a smile that said a thousand things. *Yes, it is difficult, very difficult. But we cannot stop hoping for it to be better.*

“Is it...the new government?” I ventured. China’s new president had taken a much harder line than his predecessor against Uyghur separatism. Now, women in government jobs were banned from wearing headscarves and all young men from growing the traditional Uyghur beard. It explained why Omer had shaved his moustache.

“It is...many things.”

“Do we need to be careful?” I asked. Omer knew my meaning. Careful of the police, so as not to arouse any interest. Foreign journalists had reported being followed and intimidated, and I didn’t want to be mistaken for one. Careful on behalf of Meryem. I had started avoiding the main streets whenever I went out, and took a different route to Meryem’s house each day. Careful for him. If the heat got too much, I could leave, but they had no choice.

That night I woke, my breath heaving in terrified gasps. I didn’t know where I was, or why I was in a bed without Matt. Then I remembered, and a nightmare flooded back into my mind. In my dream the night was lit by a moon, and I walked towards my house, although not a house in which I had ever lived. Bella sat hunched on the driveway in the moonlight, crying softly. As I drew closer I could see why. She pointed to the black cat of my childhood, Tabitha, dead for four decades, but resurrected in this dream only to be killed afresh. For she lay beheaded on the ground, a collar of clotted blood around the fur on her neck, her velvety-black head now detached from her motionless body. My heart bolted in my chest. I looked up in panic in time to see a figure disappear into the shadows of the house, his foot catching the moonlight as he sank into blackness. I knew who the foot belonged to. It belonged to fear, and reminded me of its dark existence.

I grabbed Bella’s hand and bolted.

Chapter Five

He turned quickly to his household, brought out a roasted fattened calf, and placed it before them.

He said: "Will you not eat?"

Quran 51: 24-27

In the dark I tried to call Matt and the girls, but their phones went unanswered, in school bags and briefcases on the other side of the world. I wanted to hear the reassuring sound of their voices. My pulse slowed, my breathing less ragged. It had just been a dream, a nightmare. I stared at the phone, willing it into life. It was still much too early for breakfast. I waited for the kettle to boil and dropped a pinch of Kashgar tea leaves, purchased from the tea shop near the mosque, in my cup. The call to prayer swelled through the morning silence, and as it died away I turned on my computer to see the news sites I read at home.

Massacre in Paris.

There were images from a stadium, just in, the pitch crowded with spectators. In close-up their faces were marked with worry and fear, hugging one another, mobile phones to their ears. What had happened? An explosion. The French president was watching the game. Was he the target? There were six dead but the president was not one of them. Then reports came of shootings in two restaurants and a bar. Every few seconds a new update arrived. Paris residents were told to stay in their homes and the internet mushroomed with messages from real people in real time listening to gunshots from inside their darkened apartments, paralyzed, terrified, uncertain. The fear was catching.

Now a concert hall crowded with young people was under attack. Fifteen-hundred young people were trapped in a concert hall with a group of crazed gunmen with high-powered weapons. Nobody could get out. I refreshed the screen continuously, unable to stop myself, pulled into the spiralling terror. Someone reported that gunmen with Kalashnikovs were shooting into the crowds, felling teenagers. The death toll kept rising. A few dozen, 40, 49, more than 50, up to 100, more than 100, about 140, 158. Young people in jeans and t-shirts, the same age as

Bella and Lily, were rushed from the scene by police, hands over their mouths as if to hold the horror in.

I tried to call the girls again in Australia, but there was still no reply. Had they heard what was happening? I felt the fear of every parent, of having your child taken from you in violence. I felt so unsettled by it all. Memories of another night came flooding back, the night of September 11, 2001. I was a junior doctor then, not a writer, working night shift in the Emergency Room. I learned what had happened on the other side of the world through television news updates, every few minutes, bringing the story of an unfolding horror. Our families slept, unaware, and we all wondered if this was the start of a world war. *Should we wake them?* we asked one another. Now in Kashgar I once again felt the horror of world events unravelling, not knowing if this was the start of something bigger. Would I look back on this moment, now, as the time when the next world war began?

In Paris the president declared a state of emergency. All I could think was: *how will this madness end?* Will this madness end? Logically, I knew it would, but I had stopped thinking with logic. In the corner of the room the kettle continued to boil, its 'off' switch broken. Steam billowed upwards and clouded the mirrored cabinet where the kettle sat. I sensed at last the rumbling of the water, and in a daze stumbled over and turned it off, leaving the leaves where they lay in the bottom of the cup.

I was so far from the comfort of Bella and Lily and Matt, their familiar hands, their gentle smells. Everything felt uncertain and terribly unsafe, even though I was a long way from Paris and the atrocities unfolding there. The police and military build-up in Kashgar—were they expecting something similar here? Were there to be co-ordinated attacks elsewhere? But I pulled on my clothes and went out, fighting the urge to give in to my fears.

Later, as darkness became dawn, then morning sunshine, I found myself in front of my usual *samsa* breakfast restaurant. I sat numbly at the outdoor table, amid wood smoke from the *tonur* oven. Today I had to learn about cooking. Cooking. It seemed pointless.

My mind was jagged. What should I do? Should I go to Meryem's house as usual?

I should go to Meryem's house as usual.

They will all be shocked at the news.

Will they be shocked?

I knocked on Meryem's heavy gold and brown doors at the usual time. She appeared round the lace curtain and greeted me with a wide smile, ushering me inside. I looked for clues in her face. She must know. When the world tilts, don't all people feel it?

"Coming upstairs for tea?" she mimed.

She didn't know. We went upstairs for tea.

Omer arrived. There were no clues in his face either. No sign he knew what had happened in Paris. My mind crowded with imagined scenes. I wanted to ask Meryem if she ever worried that one of her sons might be capable of such an atrocity. Or victim of one. I imagined her laughing response. *Mirsa? Fight Jihad? He couldn't even stick it out as a barber! Haha! How will he take up a gun? O Allah. That boy has cost this family some money.*

We made noodles again at the children's request and I let myself be comforted instead by the mixing, the kneading, the graceful pulling of noodles into finer and finer strands. Around us the children chattered. Ayesha and Zubadam had become accustomed to me now. When I sat on the carpet of the warm kitchen sitting room they bookended me, one on either side, as if to make sure I wouldn't move without their knowledge. Sometimes they rested one of their small hands on my knee, just to be sure, and I felt a tiny warmth fill me.

Over lunch, slippery noodles coated in thick pepper-red sauce, I could no longer hold back. "Did you hear about Paris?" I asked.

"Paris?" asked Meryem, looking up from her bowl of noodles. "Where is Paris? Which country is that?"

The day before we had discussed the severe restrictions on travel for Uyghurs. Meryem had never been further than two hundred miles from Kashgar, her movements entirely controlled by the Chinese government. “I went to Kucha once,” she’d told me. “My husband’s brother’s wife passed away and I went for the funeral. I had to get a pass from the government. And once I went to Maralbishi when my husband’s niece got married.”

But Paris? Paris was an unknowable world to Meryem and her family. They had heard nothing about it. News travelled slowly in Kashgar.

As I told them what had happened Meryem, Mirsa and Omer looked shocked.

“How terrible. Those poor people.”

“I think I should go home,” I said. I struggled to separate the reason from the emotion of this impulse in my head.

“But why?” asked Meryem. I didn’t have a clear answer, although I worried that the events in Paris might provide an easy excuse for the Chinese government to strengthen their chokehold on Uyghurs.

“Do you worry, as Muslims, that the government will use this as a reason to target you?” I asked.

“It’s not for being Muslim that they’ll target us,” said Omer. “It’s for being Uyghur.”

Meryem nodded. The persecution they felt was not because of their faith, but because of their ethnicity, the misfortune of being born Uyghur instead of Chinese. How can you be something other than that which you are born? You might well say, don’t be a woman. Don’t be green-eyed. Don’t be right-handed.

“If there is trouble,” said Meryem, “it could hardly be worse than it is now.”

Omer and Mirsa, who had now joined us, agreed. I thought about their already hefty burden of persecution, the limits on their freedom of movement and freedom of speech, the ever-present threat of arrest or re-education. To add more troubles? It would be like a few extra tea leaves in the pot, lost in the swirling waters.

Morning brought calm and a degree of clarity. I would not let fear overtake me in these last few days in Kashgar. In the evening I had spoken to Matt at last, although it was very late in Australia.

“I’m thinking about coming home early,” I said.

“Why?” Matt asked.

“I don’t know, it all just feels very tense. A bit unsafe.”

“But has anything actually happened in Kashgar?”

“No, not exactly.” Nothing had changed visibly overnight. There were still twenty riot vehicles parked outside my hotel, patrols through the alleys of the Old City, and checkpoints. But it was no worse than yesterday, and that seemed like a very small positive.

“That’s good, right? And everything here is fine. The girls are fine.”

“You sure?”

“Sure. Stay as long as you want.”

Part of me wanted Matt to say “Come home. I miss you. I want you to come home.”

But of course he didn’t.

Awake early as usual, and reassured a little, I took my camera to the streets to do something I had been planning since I arrived, to photograph Kashgar’s street bakers. I loved the way they worked with such energy, the heat from the tonurs a shimmering column in the cold morning air, the smell of wood smoke. I loved the growing mountains of golden rounds of bread. As I wandered I came across a tiny bakery, really no wider than a wardrobe, and watched the baker fish fat rounds of *girde* from deep inside the tonur, like overinflated golden lifeboat rings. With the baker’s permission I pulled out my SLR camera and began to take a few shots. The bread stood out against the soot-blackened wall behind, the green embroidery on the baker’s doppa and the soft pink walls of the building a colourful contrast. From the corner of my viewfinder I noticed two men walking towards me, dressed head to toe in black. I expected them to pass, and was surprised when they stopped.

“Hello,” one said, in English.

I looked at them quizzically. They had dark hair and olive skin but were definitely not Uyghur. I couldn’t place them - Mongolian perhaps, or Kyrgiz?

“Hi,” I returned, cautious. There was something off-key about the way they were dressed, almost identically, in black tops and zippered jackets, black pants and shoes. Neither carried anything. You might have thought they were on their way to a business meeting, except it was only 6 a.m..

“What are you doing here?” one asked, cocking his head towards the baker.

“I’m taking photos, of the baker,” I said, holding up my camera, but when I turned to see the baker he had slipped away into the shadows of the bakery.

“Here for work?” the other asked.

What should I reply? Their questions seemed intrusive and personal. This was not the usual line of questions from an interested pair of fellow tourists practising English. I had been in that situation hundreds of times in China, and the first question was always “What country are you from?”

“I’m researching Uyghur food and cooking,” I said.

One raised his eyebrows, just slightly.

I turned the tables. “Where are you both from?”

“Russia,” they said together. A little *too* together.

I thought that answer very, very unlikely, although not impossible. They certainly looked like no Russians I had ever met, and Russia was two thousand kilometres to the north. The hair started to prickle on the back of my neck, and I sensed, suddenly, of just how alone I was in the street, other than the now-invisible baker.

“Well,” I said, as lightly as I could muster. “Enjoy your holiday in Kashgar!” I strode purposefully away, towards a cross-street ahead. I didn’t turn back to see their expressions.

Were those men spying on me? Probably. As Meryem reminded me the day before, you went on despite the fear, and the oppression. She was still to teach me her favourite dish. She’d cooked everyone else’s favourites - *laghmannn* pulled noodles, *manta* dumplings, torn noodles, soup, meals for the children. But she had kept her own favourite until the very last, a traditional Uyghur rice pilaf called *polo*.

“Normally when we have guests we cook *polo*, *laghmannn*, and *neerenchirp*, [a dish of flat noodles with carrot and mutton] and make soup. But the most important food that we cook is *polo*. For celebrations, for weddings, we cook *polo*.”

Polo, the Uyghur dish, had many cousins with similar names, mirroring the movement of the dish outwards from Persia. The names read like a culinary archeologic trail. In Persia it was called *polow*, *pilau* in India, *palaw* in Afghanistan, *pilav* in Turkey, and *plov* in parts of Central Asia. All of them featured rice cooked in stock flavoured with meat, spices, and dried fruit. The key to any polo was separation of the cooked rice grains, to give - as an ancient Persian text described - a texture like peppercorns. This was achieved by washing the rice to remove surface starches, and coating the grains with oil before adding water, so that they remained separate during cooking.

“For me, I don’t know how and why I like *polo* but I like it a lot. Am I right? Everyone has their preferred meals.” I loved listening to Meryem speak, her quiet voice a balm amongst children’s noises and the stove’s sputtering. I had grown used to its cadences and rhythms. “I think it depends on the preference of each person, their character and digestion, what kind of meal they like most.” She prepared tea, her hands busy with the pot and the tea bowls. “My husband says men love *laghmann* very much. If I cook it today, they still ask for it tomorrow, they never say no. They still say *laghmann, laghmann, laghmann!*” She laughed, perhaps at the thought of the thousands of yards of noodles she had pulled and stretched over decades, only to be devoured by hungry husbands and sons who always asked for more.

What was my husband’s favourite meal? I searched my memories, but nothing came immediately to mind. “I like everything you cook,” he once told me, unhelpfully. Surely he must have a favourite. I wanted to be able to please him with something he loved to eat. Images flashed through my mind, of roast chickens and barbecued legs of lamb, of spitfire-hot Thai curries and gently spiced Indian dahl. I cooked like I travelled, sampling widely and curiously, and over the years we were together I had cooked him thousands of meals. Meals eaten alone together, meals shared with our families and friends, meals left in the refrigerator to be eaten after a long night at work. I became more frantic in my mental search through the catalogue, but it was true, not a single dish came to mind. He was my one and only husband. Shouldn’t I know his favourite meal by now, after twenty-seven years?

My own favourites were easier to bring to mind. “Polo is my favourite too,” I told Meryem. I remembered tasting an excellent *polo* once, in a featureless town on the road into Kashgar from the east. Aqialexiang was smothered in fine red dust, its only restaurant busy with long-distance truck drivers. The stall on the footpath hung with hunks of cooked lamb on iron hooks. A stout woman, gold earrings in her ears, bright floral scarf covering her hair, reached up to unhook one. With some ferocity she chopped it into pieces with a small tomahawk. The polo was sweet with caramelized slivers of carrot, crispy gold onion shreds and buttery rice, with the crunchy bits from the bottom of the pot mixed through. The knobbly lamb bones yielded sweet, tender meat.

Ayesha and Zubadam returned me to the present, rushing into the room together, chattering.

“What about the children?” I asked. “What do they like to eat?”

“Ayesha is grown enough to eat all kinds of meals that adults eat. She eats what everyone eats. For Zubadam I cook *zhuwawa*.” *Wawa* meant “baby” in Chinese, and they were tiny dumplings, easy to digest. “Sometimes I cook something special for them like *kheema kebab*. Finely chopped meat, fried, served in bread – you cut out the middle of the bread and fill it with meat.”

“And Fatima? What’s her favourite food?”

“My daughter doesn’t get to choose.” It was said as a statement of fact, without malice.

I looked over at Fatima. She didn’t seem affronted by her lack of choice.

“She likes everything,” Meryem continued.

Fatima looked up at me and smiled. She was unruffled. She reminded me of Bella in so many ways, with a calm, strong core of belief in herself. As we sat and watched the children, the stress of the previous day ebbed away. Meryem again flung the first wash of tea into the corner of the room, then tore a piece of crisp browned *nan* bread and passed it to me.

“You know my father was a baker,” Meryem said.

I enjoyed the bread’s chewy crust, sprinkled with sesame seeds. “I didn’t know that.”

Baking was considered a noble Uyghur profession, because bread, like tea, was essential for every meal. It was accepted Uyghur wisdom that bread marked every important transition in life - birth, coming of age, marriage, death.

“He learned how to bake when he was very little – from what I heard he was seven or eight years old. When he grew up he opened his own bakery. We used to help him make dough, making the shape of the *girde*.” They were small glazed rolls with a central indentation like a belly button. I imagined Meryem’s fingers as a child, poking the dimple into the centre of the soft white dough.

Meryem looked at me. “Now we start the *polo*.”

Time to begin cooking lunch. It was just after breakfast. Fatima left the room, returning with a bowl of carrots, fat and bright yellow.

“When I was buying these carrots, the farmer told me. ‘These are local carrots. If you buy these, your *polo* will be better, more tasty.’” She laughed. “He said, ‘You can thank me later!’” She stood each carrot upright, its point pivoting on the cutting board, and scraped off the skin with the sharp blade of her Uyghur knife. Eight yellow carrots, then two white turnips, their tops blushed with mauve.

“Will you tell me more about your father?” I asked. When she had mentioned him earlier her voice filled with love. I wondered where his bakery was, and whether we could visit. “Was that a happy time, when you were baking with him?”

“Yes, it was a great memory and very happy time. But soon after I got married he closed the bakery, because my mother wasn’t well.” Meryem sighed, and took one of the carrots from the pile and began to slice it diagonally, stacking the slices together, then cutting them carefully into long batons. “One of my sister’s sons continued with the bakery. He learned from my father. My father trained lots of bakers, one from Avat, another from Yinustan. My father treated all his apprentices the same. He not only taught them how to bake, but many other things. He was a very generous man.”

She began to slice the carrots into finer pieces, a small mountain of golden batons on the board. “He was generous to his grandchildren too, and would send special foods or gifts to Miraldijan when he was little. He always brought something when he came to visit. He took care of everyone.” Meryem’s hands stilled, and she looked out through the burlap curtain as though it wasn’t there. The only noise was

the soft hiss of the stove. “One day he was washing his feet, preparing for prayer.” She paused for a moment. “He was sitting on a chair and suddenly fell off. The doctor said he had a sudden heart attack. How could that be? He’d never been ill before in his life. They took him straight to the hospital but he was already dead.”

Meryem looked down as if noticing her own hands and the carrots for the first time, as though she had been in a trance. She began a furious chopping, the knife blade whacking into the wooden board with sharp percussion. When the chopping stilled, she lifted the back of one hand and wiped her eyes.

“Now we go and cook the polo.”

Omer had become so adept now at translation that he was almost invisible in the room between us, as our voices moved backwards and forwards through him.

“I’m so sorry, Meryem,” I said. “So very sorry.”

Fatima waited in the kitchen, and now lit the gas jet under the *kazan*, the deep cooking pot. Meryem nodded sideways, as if to acknowledge what I had said. She poured dark green oil into the *kazan*, where it slipped into blackness in the bottom of the pot. She stood, motionless, staring into the swirls and eddies as the oil heated. Suddenly she threw in a drop of water and the oil crackled and spat. “It’s ready,” she said. “We begin.”

First she added sliced onions to the oil, sliding them in with the side of her hand. They bubbled and darkened and Meryem added four chunks of mutton until they too browned. When she slid the carrots into the pot they took on a golden sheen, their sweet smell filling the kitchen. Now Meryem used her own *polo* spoon to gently turn them in the pot, just like the one I had bought on Coppersmiths’ Street. Once the carrots had softened a little, Meryem covered them with boiling water from the brass kettle. Golden globules of the carrot-yellow oil drifted to the water’s surface. She added an apple, unpeeled, cutting it in half with a tiny fruit knife, and subtracted the chunks of mutton, now cooked through. Then it was time for the rice. Fatima had been washing and draining the rice over and over, until the starchy water ran clear from the bowl. Earlier, we’d discussed the merits of various rice at length. “It’s important how you choose the rice. Before we used local rice, from Shamalbal and Atekley. It tasted good and but the grain was small. Also, it wasn’t very well

cleaned, there was dirt and stones in it. Now we buy a larger grain rice. If we have a larger grain the *polo* looks good.”

“How much rice will you need?” I asked.

“Normally one tea bowl for one person with a good appetite, otherwise it could be okay for two people also.” Everything in Meryem’s kitchen was measured in tea bowls. They served for tea, noodles, soup, water, flour, rice. Fatima poured the wet rice into the pot. This would be a six-bowl *polo*, because both Meryem’s sons were joining us for lunch, and I would at last meet the responsible and selfless Miraldijan. Meryem smoothed the surface with the flat side of her *polo* spoon, and a thin film of golden yellow cooking water appeared on top of the rice. She added salt.

“How much salt?” I asked.

“We have to match the ingredients. If there is less oil, then people don’t like it. If there is less salt, also not good. So we have to manage each ingredient in its proper way.”

I still had no idea how much salt.

Meryem wiped her hands on her apron. “Now we wait a little.” The rice simmered gently. Using the *polo* spoon, from time to time Meryem carefully turned over the top layer of the rice, ensuring it cooked evenly.

At some point, watching the pot and chatting, Zubadam went missing. We searched everywhere, increasingly frantic, until Meryem spied him from the kitchen window on the road in front of the house. She shrieked. Fatima and I rushed to the window, worried he was about to be struck by a passing car.

“Where is he?” I said. I couldn’t see him.

Meryem gasped and pointed. “What can you do!”

Fatima clutched her hand to her mouth, but I could see a smile lurking behind her fingers.

“What?” I said. “Where is he? What’s happened?”

Meryem pointed again. Now I saw him. He was squatting near an old Mercedes parked across from the house, intense concentration on his face.

Meryem shrieked. “He’s peeing and pooing!!”

In most of China, children didn’t wear diapers but instead had split pants that made it easy for them to go to the toilet in a hurry. A dark puddle was growing at

Zubadam's feet, with a smaller dark mountain in its centre, like a volcano in a lake. Nearby, a group of Chinese tourists, oblivious, took photos of the view from the city wall.

Now I spied Ayesha. She had followed her brother outside, and just as he stood up and vacated his position she put her foot right in the pile he had left neatly behind. It was no accident.

"Yah!" cried Meryem. "She's stepped in it!" Dark footprints tracked away from the puddle. "Why did you do that?" she yelled through the window to both children, trying not to laugh. Zubadam grinned up at her. Now to Ayesha. "Don't step in it again!! No!!"

A car approached, slowly, and the children marched smartly out of the way towards the house. Fatima started to giggle, behind her hand at first, until she could no longer stifle her laughter. "The car just ran over the poo!"

"Maybe that's why he wanted to go downstairs." Meryem muttered. Then she was back at the window. "Yah! Ayesha! Stay away! Stop moving!" Ayesha's footprints tracked in all directions. "Tell your brother to sit beside the wall!"

"Where's the broom?" asked Fatima.

A broom? I thought. What use would a broom be?

"Check under the ladder, it must be there," said Meryem, unable to control her laughter any longer. Tears ran down her face.

"Oh no! The *polo*!"

We had forgotten the meal entirely, and now Meryem returned her attention to the pot. The *polo* was almost ready. From the stairwell I heard Fatima patiently taking care of the children and their shoes, scrubbing their hands and feet in the downstairs sink. They came upstairs in their socks, all smiles, smelling innocently soapy. Meryem scolded them, gently. Zubadam swung his arms, his feet rooted to the spot, beaming, while Ayesha hopped from side to side.

Meryem shook her head at them. "You never listen to me!" Still laughing, she took a handful of dark Kashgar dried apricots, small and brown like dates.

"Now we put them into the rice," she said, inserting them one at a time in the *polo* like plunging sixpences into a Christmas pudding. They would swell and soften, absorbing the flavour of the *polo*. Now she gently drew the rice from the deep edges of the pot into the middle, making a mound. She placed the mutton pieces gently back on top, and covered the whole with an upturned enamel basin before replacing

the lid, to keep the moisture in. Meryem looked over at Omer and I and sighed with happy exhaustion. “Almost time for lunch.”

It was Friday, the day of prayer and rest. With Miraldijan coming and Omer and I present, I wondered if we would eat in the more formal downstairs sitting room. I hoped not - it was colder and darker than the warm, cozy upstairs room. But we were to eat upstairs. We were no longer considered guests who needed to be received in the formal room downstairs - we would eat upstairs, as part of the family.

The kitchen sitting room was spread with the green and gold fleur-de-lys tablecloth, and the *gizek* was more abundant today. There were sweets as well as nuts, grapes, and several kinds of bread. In the only other nod to formality we sat in the order prescribed by Uyghur tradition for guests. This was considered very important, and one could cause slight by placing a guest out of their proper place. Until now I had been unaware of any particular arrangement - Omer and I always sat on the far side of the room against the wall where it was easy to watch without getting in the way. But now I could see we had always been seated in the position of honour. Today we sat on gold and blue cushions, rather than the carpet. Meryem and Fatima seated themselves opposite us, the children to either side of them. Miraldijan, Meryem’s eldest son, arrived. He was tall and gracious and spoke a little English, shaking first Omer’s hand, then mine, looking at me with an unbroken gaze. Zubadam and Ayesha were far less formal, squealing and rushing to clasp his legs. He lifted them up and swung them in the air, one at a time, while they laughed.

He turned to me, as if to apologize. “Thank you for visiting my mother’s house.”

“Thank you for letting me spend time with her, learning about her cooking.”

“Of course, it’s my pleasure,” he said, as though his mother’s excellent cooking was somehow his doing. Still, he said it in such a friendly, polite way I found myself immediately liking him. There was a space next to Miraldijan for Mirsa, who was yet to arrive. It was unclear when Mirsa might be finished his work at the supermarket.

“I think we should maybe start without him,” Miraldijan said, not without some regret.

While we drank tea and snacked on *gizek*, Meryem left the room. She returned with a deep oval platter piled high with golden *polo*. Steam curled away from it in tendrils as she settled it carefully on the floor. The apricots, apple and mutton lay in a glistening, tumbled pile on top of the rice, each grain separate and gleaming with oil and shreds of carrot. After prayers, Meryem served, giving each of us a heaped bowl. She took a round of *nan* bread onto the floor, and using it as a plate, carefully sliced the large chunks of mutton into smaller pieces, tender and pink. Omer and I were each given a prize piece, with a piece of apple and a few apricots. The bread caught all the meat juices, and was torn and distributed to all.

Miraldijan took up his spoon and began to eat. I followed. The *polo* was savoury, and yet with layers of sweetness registering one by one. There was the earthy, buttery sweetness of the carrot shreds, curled through the rice. The caramel sweetness of the few onions, soft and brown with crisp burnt edges. The tart-sweet apple. And lastly the apricots, shrouded darkly around their seeds, intensely honeyed. I rolled the apricot seed around my mouth, sucking the very last shreds of flesh from it. The rice was textured, oily, each grain separate and distinct, like eating a handful of soft, smooth seeds. And the mutton was oily too, but tender. I tried to slow down and savour every mouthful, because this *polo* was, I now knew, the best in Kashgar.

“What do you think?” Meryem asked.

I’d learned a phrase from Omer that I now tried for the first time. “*Tamak bake orshepto*,” I stuttered. *The meal is delicious.*

Everyone cheered. The children ate small mountains of *polo*, asked for more, then for tea. Fatima poured the hot tea into their bowls, mixing with the last of their rice, like soup.

Meryem left her spoon beside her bowl and ate her *polo* the traditional way, direct from the serving platter. She scooped the rice with the side of her hand, her index finger curled around the top of her thumb. The oiliness of the *polo* left a sheen on her fingers.

Mirsa arrived at the tail end of lunch. He greeted his older brother warmly, and with relief I sensed no animosity between them. With all of Meryem's children present the room hummed with chatter, everyone catching up on the week's news. For once I was content to observe, with no need for translation. I leaned back against the wall, a bowl of tea warming my hands. Ayesha clamoured at Fatima's knee for more tea, just like the grown-ups. Zubadam stole *gizek* sweets when no one was looking. Fatima listened as both of her brothers spoke, smiling, adding something occasionally to the conversation, patiently tending to the children. Their small faces turned to watch Miraldijan whenever he spoke. They crept from their places to sit beside him, his arms holding them gently to his side while he talked, until Fatima tugged them back down to sit. Mirsa, sitting between his brother and me, kept quiet, hunched over a little, but I noticed that each time Meryem offered him more tea or more polo, which was often, he spread his arms forward with his bowl, opening up his chest, lifting up his face. He came close to smiling as he sipped and ate. Gradually he stopped hunching inwards and leant forwards into the conversation, his brother and sister moving subtly to include him in the circle.

I savoured the aromas, the caramelized scent of the last of the *polo*, the smoke of the stove, the faint note of rose petals from the tea. I took in the textures of the red patterned carpets, the way the afternoon winter sun lit the lace curtain from behind, the quiet hiss of the kettle, the muted sounds from the street below. Soon I would be back with my own family, my own children, eating together. I was glad I had stayed. I would have regretted leaving without seeing Meryem together with all of her children, without eating this meal, without her *polo*. As I looked over at Meryem I noticed how her eyes touched on everyone in the room, first one, then the other, drawing her children and grandchildren to her. There was a sense of completeness, of order. I felt the calm presence of other guests in the room too, gentle shadows, Meryem's father and her sisters. All of those who were with her, and who were no longer with her, the circles of family present and past, eating together.

Security at Kashgar's airport was intense. There were dozens of police and a long queue for the x-ray machine, where it was necessary to remove shoes, belts,

hats, coats and scarves. I was sent back to check in my cabin bag, not permitted because of its pull-out handle—a risky place, I guessed, where a weapon could be hidden. A young Chinese woman in a fluffy pink coat was told she must also check in her giraffe print bag for the same reason. She refused, pouting and wheedling, but it did her no good. When I saw her last she was arguing heatedly with the airport staff as our flight was called.

I walked onto the aircraft, saddened to be leaving Kashgar behind. Images crowded in my mind of hands kneading dough, pulling noodles, the rhythm of chopping vegetables, the smells of smoke and steam. Meryem’s voice, soft but lively. I had given Meryem and Fatima each a silk headscarf to thank them for their hospitality. Meryem’s eyes widened as she pulled it out of its wrapping. I hoped she liked it. As I boarded the plane I noticed a man in a white shirt and tie lounging in one of the front row seats. He looked vaguely familiar, and there was something about the way he sat, his legs spread wide, one arm dangling, that suggested he had been there for some time. He looked at me as he spoke into his mobile phone in Chinese and I recognised him as one of the two “Russian” men I had met outside the bakery in the Old City.

“She’s arrived on the plane,” he said into the phone.

She? I swivelled around to look behind me, expecting a VIP or at least the difficult young woman in the pink coat. But I was completely alone. There was nobody behind me. Somebody wanted to make sure I left Kashgar. As I hurried to my seat I glanced back at him, my heart pounding hard. But he ignored me, then stood and left.

Meryem's Polo

Serves 8

Polo is a dish meant for sharing. It's a joyful expression of abundance, a dish for feasts and celebrations. It has a buttery sweetness thanks to the carrots. You could serve it alongside fragrant black tea and bread, or, to balance the rich oiliness of the polo, in Kashgar it is often served with a sharp salad made from shredded raw vegetables (turnip, carrot, radish) with a dressing made from black vinegar, chilli and a touch of salt.

Ingredients

Eight large carrots, julienned

One small onion, finely sliced

400g lamb shoulder in large pieces

Boiling water

Eight tea bowls of short grain rice (one for each person) - approximately 100g per person

Twenty dried apricots

One apple or one quince, washed, halved, skin on

Vegetable oil

Salt

Start with a nice deep, heavy-bottomed wok, and in it heat one cup of oil over high heat until the oil starts to smoke. Add the onions and then lamb—they will sizzle madly and you should take care not to get splashed by the oil. Fry them briefly then add all the carrots at once, stirring and turning them gently for several minutes until they have softened. You will notice the oil has turned a wonderful golden orange colour. Add enough boiling water to just cover the carrots and boil with the lid off over high heat. You may need to add a little more water if too much evaporates – the level should never fall below that of the carrots. Add the halved apple and reduce the heat to moderate.

While the carrots are cooking, wash the rice five or six times until the water runs clear, then drain it and set aside. Remove the large meat chunks and apple from the pan, and set them aside. Add the rice to the pan, distributing it evenly. Smooth

the surface. The rice should be just covered with a thin layer of yellow gold cooking water, no more than a quarter of an inch. You can add a little more water if needed at this point, to keep the rice just covered.

Now add 2-3 teaspoons of salt, sprinkling it over the surface of the rice. Put the lid on and continue to cook over a moderately high heat but from time to time, gently turn over only the top layer of rice and re-smooth it so it cooks evenly.

Towards the end of the cooking, once the rice grains still have a central hard bite but are soft on the outside, make a well in the centre and add back the apple and meat, then cover them with rice. Add the apricots, poking them into the rice. Now gently move rice away from the sides of the pan and into a mound in the centre of the wok. Cover the mound with an upside down metal bowl and put the lid of the wok back on. Now you can reduce the heat to low and leave the whole thing to steam for a further twenty minutes.

You'll now the polo is cooked when the water has all evaporated and the grains have a soft bite. When you're ready to serve, take the meat and apple from their hidden place within the rice and slice them into pieces. Remove the apricots too and set them aside.

Now mix the rice gently but thoroughly so the carrot is spread evenly through. The polo looks wonderful mounded on a large platter with the meat, apple and apricots piled atop.

Eat it with a spoon.

Home

Certainly, travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in the ideas of living.

Miriam Beard

Matt and I sat side by side on the sofa we had bought together years before, a soft moss green. I smelled his familiar smell, fresh laundry and perspiration, and registered all the other smells of my house, the smells of home. The huge gum tree outside the kitchen window, faintly eucalyptus but also honey-sweet now that it was flowering. The washed dishes in the rack by the sink, detergent-fresh. The wood polish of the mahogany dining room table.

“Did you learn what you needed to know about Uyghur cooking in Kashgar?” Matt asked.

It was our first quiet moment together, a few days after I’d returned. When I arrived home Matt and the girls were all busy with individual projects - Lily was about to begin high school and needed to find a dress for her primary school graduation dinner and Bella was preparing for a school trip to the Indian Himalayas. It would be her first trip overseas without us, a fact I was trying hard to pretend was okay, and was testing out her new backpack.

“I think so,” I said. “Mikerem was just the most lovely, gentle person, and a great cook. But it was unsettling to see how much things had changed there.”

Matt nodded as though listening but I could sense his concentration drift. He pulled his phone out of his pocket to check something.

“Busy?” I asked.

He gave a wry smile. “New York. You know.”

As Matt’s business had expanded and prospered over the years, so had the worries—projects in other countries, emails in the middle of the night, early morning phone calls to coincide with office hours in New York or Dubai.

“What should we do after Christmas?” I asked, trying to prise Matt’s mind away from his work. We always found a few days to get away to the beach and spend time together, just the four of us.

“I don’t really care,” Matt sighed. “We could stay home.”

“You want to stay home?” My voice registered my surprise.

“No, I didn’t say that. Just, we could go to the beach, we could stay home, I don’t care either way.”

“But you want to go away together, right?”

“Sure, sure,” he said, nodding unconvincingly as his phone rang now and he stood up to take the call outside.

I sighed. A familiar anxiety took hold, of Matt drifting away, of me trying to tether him somehow. I thought about the ways I had tried over the last year to keep us glued together, to hold on to what used to have, but the effort was increasing and the points of firm stickiness between us fewer—the girls, our house, our travels together. Now even that last was under threat as Matt pushed me to travel on my own, and subtly discouraged me from coming with him on his trips. An uglier emotion, anger, bubbled up now. I made fruitless lists in my head of all the ways in which I was trying to make our marriage work while Matt continued exactly as he had before, pretending nothing was wrong. Organising holidays. Visiting his parents. Dinners together. I strode into the kitchen and opened the pantry door, pretending to look for something. He still hadn’t come back inside from his phone call. Who was he speaking to? I slammed the door shut, flinching.

Dinner needed starting. I pulled a plump chicken, salad greens, snow peas and tomatoes from the refrigerator. As I held the soft roundness of the tomatoes in my hands my breathing slowed, my tight shoulders relaxed. It was impossible to grip a tomato tightly. I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, and a calmness returned. I turned on the gas in the double oven of the old Wedgwood stove, and began to clean and prepare the chicken for roasting, washing it and patting it dry before rubbing the skin with a knob of butter. That would make the skin crispy and golden, and keep the meat moist inside. When my hands were busy like this my mind stilled. Matt was just busy. So busy. We would talk about Kashgar another time. And the beach. And all the other subjects too difficult to broach.

Bella rushed into the kitchen, excited and buoyant. “I’m halfway through packing my backpack,” she said, grinning. It hit me again suddenly that she would be leaving in a few weeks. I felt a mixture of pride and dread.

“Good work,” I said.

“But right now I need a mango. How long til dinner?”

“At least an hour,” I said, passing her a plate.

“What have you still got to fit in?”

“My hiking boots and thermal leggings. And my sleeping bag.” She sat at the dining room table peeling the mango with a sharp knife, the sweet tropical smell wafting towards me at the kitchen bench where I stood chopping the salad vegetables.

“You will miss me when I’m gone, won’t you?” Bella asked.

I recognised the complicated feelings in her, of wanting to go, and simultaneously wanting to stay, of wanting to be independent, but also missed. I looked down at my hands and was suddenly filled with a physical ache for her, even with her right in front of me. How would I cope with her gone? Wasn’t she too young to be travelling out into the world? My hands slowed, deliberate, concise, as though by slowing them I could somehow slow time, telescope it out. I tried to mimic Mikerem’s careful grace as I cut but my vision blurred and tears welled in my eyes. I put down my cleaver and walked over to Bella, who was surprised by receiving a long kiss on her forehead from her mother.

“Oh Mum,” she said, as she saw my tears.

“I’ll miss you so much. I love you,” I said.

“I love you too,” said Bella.

I had learned much in Kashgar, some things I had expected, some not, but they hadn’t helped me resolve what was happening at home. Instead, I concentrated on forward momentum, on figuring out my next journey, to Iran, and how to arrange to cook with a woman in her kitchen. I ate lunch with my only Persian friend, Navid, who’d studied medicine with me, in the hope that he might know someone.

Navid and I drank coffee in the hospital cafeteria and talked about our work—his as a children’s arthritis specialist, mine as a children’s emergency doctor.

“Your mum?” I asked. “How is she?” I had never forgotten her, or her cooking. I still remembered the day thirty years before when she’d cooked a Persian feast for all of Navid’s university friends. The table at his house was covered with plates of bright herby salads, baskets of breads, platters of char-grilled beef and lamb, dainty honeyed pastries, and bowls of nuts and fruits. In the centre of it all,

like a crowning glory between the saffron-poached chickens and beef kebabs and bowls of fresh herbs, was an immense oval platter of gold and white rice that appeared sprinkled with jewels - ruby red barberries, green pistachios, finely sliced orange rind, pink rose petals, pale almond slivers. Here and there dark amber threads of saffron appeared. I spooned some of the rice onto my plate, releasing steam from the dish and a smell I would come to know years later as the unmistakable aroma of Persian saffron. I took a mouthful, and the room, the people, the noise and conversations all dropped away. The long, slender rice grains were buttery and separate, but there was also the tartness and sweetness of the firm little barberries, the crunch of the almonds and pistachios, and the gentle bitterness of the orange rind. The scent of rose petals and another smell too, the rich, earthy, floral notes of saffron. I chewed slowly, transported elsewhere.

Navid didn't know of anyone who might be able to help me, his mum was now too old to cook for herself anymore, and his sisters were busy with their careers. But he called me a week later.

"I've been thinking about your project, Fiona," he said. "My sister's best friend has recently moved back to Shiraz and would be willing to have you come visit."

"She would? I asked. It was almost unbelievable. An excited spark ignited in my chest.

"Sure," said Navid. "I'm going to put you in touch with her."

"I have a contact in Iran!" I told Matt.

"You do? That's great."

"Navid put us in touch," I said. "She lives in Shiraz." It was a city I'd heard Navid describe so many times. Poetry and roses. Gardens and mosques. The ancient ruins of Persepolis.

"Great, great," he said.

Persepolis was somewhere Matt and I had once thought about visiting together, if the opportunity arose. "You should come with me," I said, impetuously.

"You know I can't do that," he said. "The girls..."

I tried to hide my disappointment. In the past he would have considered the possibility. “My mum could come and stay,” I said. “And look after the girls. You’d love it. The history, the art, the...”

Matt cut me off. “Fiona, you know it’s impossible. Even if I wanted to.”

I lay in bed next to Matt that night, shoulder to shoulder but not touching, a snowdrift of white cotton sheet between us in the dark. I slid my left pinkie finger across the vast space to touch the side of his hand, holding my breath in case he pulled it away.

“Matt,” I whispered towards the dark ceiling. “Are you awake?”

“Hmm,” he murmured.

I waited, willing him to say something, anything, or to reach out and take my hand under the sheets. I had been patient, so patient. I could tell he’d been struggling these last few years. I had waited, not accused, been understanding. He was depressed. And very busy at work. And he’d had that awful year of stomach pains that had ended in an operation.

“We need to talk about what’s happening between us.”

Silence. Silence like a great black balloon slowly inflating, filling the corners of the room. It pressed on my chest, suffocating me in silence. I struggled against it with all my will, like coming up for breath from deep below the surface of the water.

“Matt?”

He was asleep, or pretending to be. Something inside me closed over, and hardened a little like a shield.

I stood in the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art for the opening of the Asia Pacific Triennial, hemmed in by colourful, noisy people. Only a week before I had stood in the streets behind Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, crowded by men in black coats and fur hats strolling home after Friday prayers. But here in Brisbane loud pulsing music filled the space and we clustered together under the aged beams of an art installation from India, reclaimed timber from an old jetty. The calm, clean smell of the gallery had been replaced with the mingled sweat of ten thousand bodies. Matt was here with me somewhere, but I had already lost him in the crowd.

It was his crowd, the art crowd. I was always on the peripheries, supportive, but not artistic myself. Matt's company were sponsoring the exhibition and a lot of people wanted to speak with him. I stood making small talk with someone I vaguely knew, sipping champagne. It tasted cheap and unpleasant. Nearby, a woman stood with her back to me, wearing a fringed raffia dress in olive green. The raffia fringing begged to be touched, twitching and rustling with her every movement. I watched, mesmerised, as she leaned suggestively towards the man beside her. She was tall and slim, with a deep bob of dark brown hair. From behind I admired her tanned muscular legs in silver heels. She shifted slightly on her feet and I noticed her dress was open at both sides, revealing her completely naked body beneath. The raffia fringes hinted at a curve of breast, hip and buttock but revealed nothing more. Everyone around me tittered. Was she an artist? Part of the show? A shameless exhibitionist or just empowered? The woman turned fully towards me just as everyone else's attention was caught by a noise to our left. Her raffia dress swung aside and I now saw it was completely open at the front, more like a long waistcoat than a dress. It uncovered her tanned breasts, her firm tattooed stomach, and her shaved labia. She had a pendulous clitoris, almost hermaphroditic in proportions. For a moment I wondered if she was, in fact, a man with a very small penis. But she was a woman, and also about sixty years old, her lined face with deep-set eyes a discordant match for her firm body.

I looked away, shocked. But I was surprised by my shock. In my years as a doctor I'd seen plenty of lady and man parts, more than I cared to think about. Healthy, diseased, young, old, hairy, shaved, tattooed, pierced, intact, traumatised. Why did I find this woman's so confronting? How had I become such a prude? I chided myself for failing to be open-minded. Later in the evening she abandoned her dress altogether and strode through the vast, high-ceilinged gallery naked except for a folding paper fan and her high heeled sandals. The music throbbed, and the crowd around me moved toward a dark spiral maze of ghostly backlit photographs. The mob pulled me with them, and I could feel the heat and close press of bodies in the noise and darkness. My head pounded and there was a dizzy feeling behind my eyes. It was like being in a crowded subway carriage when the lights fail, arms, legs, buttocks and hips pressing and pushing.

I escaped, fighting against the swarm of hot bodies into the night air outside the gallery. I took a deep breath. The air was cooler here, scented with frangipani from the nearby trees.

I'm just having a breather, I texted Matt.

Okay, he replied. *Find you later?*

Sure.

I needed to get away. Far away. Coming home had been a dislocation, my yearning for Matt unfulfilled. I felt strangely separate from all of these people. I needed the comfort of a kitchen. I needed to escape.

- End of Examinable Section of Creative Work -
For Part Two: Shiraz, see Appendix

Appendix

Section Two

Shiraz

Chapter 1

If I hear, "Be afraid of Tehran," I'm like, "I'd better go to Tehran."

Henry Rollins

Questions I have about Iran:

Can you wear nail polish?

Sandals or closed shoes?

Will I be able to get a sim card and money changed at the airport?

What will Azar be like?

I stood before the mirror in my hotel room in Tehran, buttoning my long coat over jeans. Outside it was a warm autumn day, the kind of day when at home I might have worn a short-sleeved top and a light skirt. I adjusted and re-adjusted my headscarf until I could take a few strides around the bed without it slipping off. I felt hot and overdressed, a dampness already gathering under both arms. At home I'd practiced my headscarf, and all my outfits, after trawling the net for images of women in Tehran's streets, figuring out what they wore and whether any of my existing clothes suited. It had been far easier in Kashgar, where foreigners were expected to dress differently and leave their heads uncovered. I couldn't even figure out the right names for everything. A long dress was called an *abaya*, but what was the difference between a *chador* and a *burqa*? I scrolled through hundreds of images. When I consulted the Iran Visa website, it advised that "Obeying Islamic rules including Hijab or Islamic dress-code is necessary in Iran." But what was an Islamic dress code? Helpfully, they included four strict rules and five lengthy tips: the head must be covered at all times, as well as the arms and legs. In Iran, that meant a knee-length coat, called a *manteau*, buttoned up over a pair of trousers, and a long rectangular scarf arranged loosely over the head and shoulders, leaving the neck and face free.

Before the connecting flight from Dubai to Tehran I watched the other women in the waiting lounge. Only a few wore headscarves, but they looked like tourists with their fair skin and light hair. A young woman in a trench coat and skinny jeans pulled a Burberry scarf over her long, thick auburn hair with some small lack of enthusiasm, leaving both ends hanging over her shoulders and chest

like tabards, or the tresses of a wig. I fingered the tassels of my navy blue headscarf inside my bag, wondering if it was the right kind of thing. The right shape, the right length. The right weight. Not see-through. Not patterned. When should I put it on? I wondered. Nobody else seemed in a rush. In flight? As soon as we crossed into Iranian air space? Just before landing? Maybe I would be able to find something more colourful once I arrived.

Flying into Tehran I felt alone, but exhilarated. Tired but tense with possibilities. Since Kashgar I had taken another three journeys alone. Turkey. Iceland. Portland. In the past I'd always travelled with Matt, but now it seemed impossible, with our schedules and commitments. Or because of something else. In the past we had always managed to make it work, the scheduling clashes resolving at the last minute. Now it was almost like he was pushing me to go on my own.

As we drove along the Persian Gulf Freeway into downtown Tehran we passed an enormous gold-domed mosque, like a magnificent turnip burnished and shining in the sun. Motorbikes sped past, full throttle. Men rode alone or in pairs, sometimes with women on the back, their headscarves billowing. Roadside stalls sold melons and cold drinks. There were other things too. Enormous black flags, with curved white script. Cars decorated with lettering that dripped blood. Sides of buildings painted with the portraits of men in military uniform, holding guns, staring into the distance. These things made me shift uncomfortably in my seat, and quickened my pulse.

"Who is that?" I asked Farhad, my taxi driver as we passed another mural. He was young, and spoke skilful English.

"A martyr, from the Iran-Iraq war," Farhad said.

"And the black flags?" I asked. We passed over a bridge, a colonnade of waving black flags beside us like sentries.

"It's for Ashura," Farhad told me.

"Ashura?"

"A religious festival, for the death of Hossein."

I nodded, but had no idea what Farhad was talking about.

On the street Tehran was vibrant, frenetic, welcoming, familiar. The city reminded me of Kashgar, with the push and pulse of street life. The man on the corner with two sacks of walnuts and some dried fruit leathers for sale. The old lady sitting on the ground outside the bank, her blanket spread with cleaning cloths and household odds and ends – steel wool, a scrubbing mitt, a few of this, a couple of that, a look of pride and boredom. The stores clustered together, selling faucets, sinks and bathroom fixtures; or batteries and chargers. The rows of motorbikes parked on the pavement. The throttle of motorbikes on the street. The kiosks selling newspapers, drinks and snacks. The feeling of lack of threat. Of complete safety. Of open friendliness.

Less familiar were the women in black, although they quickly became human, recognizable in their gestures if not their dress. I had a whole day to myself before taking a train south to Shiraz, so I visited Golestan Palace with its shimmering hall of mirrors, then took the metro from Imam Khomeini station north, to Tajrish to visit the Saadabad Palace. While walking the streets near the Golestan Palace, the natural motion of my body seemed to cause one end of my head scarf to mysteriously grow longer and longer, while its opposite grew ever shorter and threatened to unveil me. In the metro I joined the women-only carriage as a novelty, and took my seat amongst the black chadors. At first, they all seemed similar, swaddled black shapes with only faces and hands showing. But as I sat and observed I noticed small details. A wisp of chestnut hair. A ruby ring. Painted nails. A peek of patent leather shoes. At Taleghani a group of teenage girls entered the carriage in fits of laughter, teasing, cajoling, whispering, shrieking. Scarves and chadors were constantly adjusted, hair smoothed, window reflections sought to check. I could see their sneakers and jeans under their chadors.

Every city has its system of commerce, but in Tehran they wrote their own rules. In Tehran, the train was also a travelling shop. Sales people waited on the platform to board, especially in the women-only carriages, where women could buy—with some degree of privacy—the things it might be less suitable to purchase in public. Mascara, lipstick, eyebrow pencils. Hair accessories. Socks. Fake fringes attached to headbands, so peeking out from under your headscarf it looked as though you had dyed your hair. Perfumes. Silk scarves. Chewing gum. Cushion covers.

Bags of sweets. None dared insult the women with dull household goods. Each saleswoman had their own territory and rules of engagement. When entering the carriage they waited for the previous vendor to finish before launching their sales pitch, walking the length of the carriage with goods draped over their arms, hoping to excite interest. If nobody was tempted, they alighted after a couple of stations to try a different train. The hair clip lady had a long rope like a ponytail that she fastened to the overhead rail, the coloured and rhinestoned hair clips clasped along its length like so many bulldog clips. The lip liner lady pulled up the sleeve of her chador rather provocatively, revealing candy stripes on her skin, to save her customers testing the colours.

But the most popular was the seller of underwear. She was a little heavy set, with glasses. She wore a chador, sealed around the edges of her face and fastened tightly under her chin. But when she entered the carriage the previous sales woman hurried away and all eyes swivelled to her. Over her left arm, cloaked in black, she carried two brightly coloured pairs of knickers, her hefty forearm threaded through the leg holes. She delivered her pitch, but before she was even a minute in, someone's hand stole out to touch the fabric. She paused, unhooking the knickers from her arm and inserting both hands into their waist and pulling them apart, like boasting of the size of a caught fish, to show just how big these pants could stretch. All the chadors watched, transfixed, their faces upturned to her as she spoke.

“Look at this, ladies, one size fits everyone,” I imagined her saying as she demonstrated the excellent elastic and marvellous gusset of her products. At her feet was an old sports bag with a zip along its top, filled with packets of brightly coloured underpants in cellophane packs of five. She pulled one out.

A young customer, and all in black bar her red sneakers, asked, “Can I see the tiger-print ones?”

She could. The tiger-print pair were removed, and a different pair folded carefully to take their place. The young woman fingered the cotton and tested the stretch.

Another customer. “Can I swap the blue for the peach pair in her pack of five?”

“You can.” More unsnapping, unfolding, refolding, careful repackaging. A small bundle of rials changed hands and the five-pack of knickers disappeared into the folds of the woman’s chador.

The knicker-seller unpacked more pairs— floral, leopard, baby pink, fluorescent orange. All around me black-clothed women reached out to stretch, touch, and buy packs of knickers, as though a train carriage was only the most natural place in the world to do this, in front of many strangers who all happened to be other women.

At the Saadabad Museum, the Shah’s former residence was a good example of just how complicated and conflicted everyone’s feeling were about the former Shah. Inside his opulent home three men were unrolling the largest silk carpet I had ever seen, every inch of its vastness adorned with detailed flowers and birds. In other rooms the Shah’s many gifts from respectful heads of state around the world were respectfully displayed. Outside, there once stood a giant bronze statue of the Shah himself in full military uniform, but after the Revolution of 1979 they cut him off just above the knees, and now all that remained were a pair of giant bronze boots standing body-less and hollow. I noticed the toes of the boots were very shiny, as though someone still polished them. At the coffee shop I sat outside underneath chestnut trees. Two women, elegant in suits with contrasting headscarves, next to me, drank coffee and smoked slim black cigarettes as they conversed in low voices, listening to Arab music on their phone.

The first proper meal I ate in Tehran came courtesy of my taxi driver, Farhad, who, when I asked if he could recommend somewhere good near the bazaar for lunch, suggested Moslem restaurant. The Bazaar turned out to be a vast sprawl of passageways, tunnels and alcoves. How would I find a single restaurant? As I passed a long and impatient queue of people a spruiker handed me a flyer. I wondered what they were all queueing for? Looking down at the paper in my hand the only English I could read said “Moslem Restaurant”. On the back of the ticket was a menu in Farsi, numbering fourteen items. I couldn’t read a single one, so, as the queue shuffled forward, I enlisted the help of the young couple in front of me. He was handsome

and wore a tight t-shirt and an expression of bewilderment, she was blonde and compact under her manteau, with crimson lips and a small plaster across the bridge of her nose. They spoke no English and I no Farsi, but through a combination of hand gestures and charades they indicated to me the best two of the fourteen dishes. I circled them with a pen borrowed from the spruiker. We shuffled forward up narrow stairs that opened into a low-ceilinged dining room with narrow tables lined up like tight rows of school desks, every seat filled and every diner touching elbows with the person next to them. The noise of conversation and scraping seats and cutlery brought to mind a mess hall, with people in constant turnover. As soon as a seat was vacated, it was taken again, vacated, and taken in rapid succession. I couldn't have left at this point even had I wanted to, so pressed in was I between the young couple in front and the group of women behind me. At the long cash register counter I took the coloured plastic tray thrust into my hands, along with a packet of cutlery and a small dish of yoghurt sprinkled with dried mint.

At the register I handed my menu to the cashier, with the two circled dishes. This seemed to cause some consternation and confusion but, unable to make head or tail of it, I pay my money and sit down, shepherded to a seat by one of the waiters. He looked at my meal receipt and a look of surprise passed over his face, followed by an enormous smile. "Welcome to Iran!" he said, which turned out to be the only English phrase he knew and one that I would hear echoed many times a day for the coming three weeks. He brought me a basket of flat bread and a dish of raw onions in pale quarters. Despite studying my fellow diners I couldn't figure out what to do with the onions and left them untouched. Returning a few minutes later he cleared space and, smiling even more broadly, set an entire lamb shank before me, followed by a platter of rice polo flavoured with broad beans and dill. My fork had just begun to hover over the lamb when a second waiter arrived with whole poached chicken swimming in a saffron broth with pearly wilted onions, and another platter of rice polo, topped with saffron-coloured grains and a knob of melting butter.

The waiters hovered behind me proudly. It was way too much food. The diners to my left and right, and opposite, looked on in appreciation, as if to say *at last, here's a foreigner with a taste for Persian food*. I smiled, because I was really very hungry, and began with the slow-braised lamb shank, tender enough to be

pulled apart with a fork, sweet and succulent. The broad bean polo was served with slivers of pistachio, and half an Iranian lime for sourness, herby and fresh. There was a little cube of saffron *tahdeeg*, the rice crust, on the side for crunch. The chicken was as tender as butter, but after devouring the whole rich lamb shank and half the polo I was defeated. My two waiters, who had monitored my progress with growing satisfaction, put the remainders in several takeaway containers for me, and sent me on my way with what seemed like a hundred well wishes and a curious tiny packet of banana chewing gum.

Sleeper trains are intimate places. When I boarded the Tehran-Shiraz overnight train I had low expectations, but like almost everything so far in Iran I was learning not to be surprised when the opposite held out to be true. The Fadak train was sleek and modern, with elegant calligraphy painted down its sides in silver and green. There was on-board air conditioning and wifi, and as I entered my compartment I noted damask curtains and cotton sheets and pillows, and a light quilt for every berth. I had opted for a female-only compartment, and sitting in the wide comfortable seats were a frail elderly woman and her daughter, and a much younger woman wearing a manteau and trousers. Between our seats was a tray filled with snacks and tea. The young woman closed the door to our compartment, and as we pulled away from Imam Khomeini Station to head south the double televisions in our compartment televised a prayer. The others followed along, murmuring, while I bowed my head and watched from the corner of my eye. The daughter of the elderly woman whispered the prayer as it played, holding upraised palms in front of her like balancing an orange in each hand. I thought that once our journey was underway and prayers were over, we might be able to remove our headscarves. I was wrong. In Iran it was compulsory for all women, foreigners included, to wear *hijab*, or modest dress, in public - but was a train compartment private or public? I found headscarf etiquette baffling. And my scarf, as if sensing my uncertainty, behaved badly. It slipped and misplaced itself. I failed to notice. The women waited to see if I had, and when it became clear I hadn't the youngest woman touched my elbow gently, with a smile, and pointed to my head. "Oh!" I exclaimed, embarrassed, and hurriedly pulled it back over my head and too far down my forehead, so it now hooded my eyes. They laughed with me, and made signs for me not to worry. Then, to make me feel

better, they insisted I try their snacks - saffron pistachios, Persian sugared almonds, and tiny dried figs the size of a marble. The figs were hard and chewy, but became as soft and sweet as toffee in my mouth.

Sometime in the night our train passed parallel to the border Iraq. Between us lay the Zagros Mountains, steep amber outcrops rising from the arid landscape. Small villages of walled courtyard homes, with wiry shepherds tending flocks of lean sheep, their feet raising plumes of red dust between stands of pomegranate trees. Darkness falls quickly in the desert, and with nothing better to occupy us we retired to our beds. I vaguely recalled a stop just before midnight when many of the passengers alighted briefly to attend to their fifth and final prayer of the day in the station's prayer room. As I fell asleep, rocking in the top bunk, I imagined lying across the saddle of a giant horse, galloping, galloping, galloping, snorting and galloping. As the train gathered speed in the black night, faster and smoother, I then imagined I was riding a giant wild Persian leopard, his vast paws hitting the rails softly, softly, until his claws were unsheathed and showers of sparks exploded around his feet, gnashing at the metal.

Then it was morning. From the window I saw jagged mountains, amber and rose, and shepherds with flocks of goats and sheep. The daughter of the elderly woman was fixing her headscarf while her mother sat on the edge of her bunk, wide awake. Breakfast was served by our conductor. A fresh tray of more small packages. Sweet coffee, a soft white bread roll, jam. Cream cheese. A carton of sugary chocolate milk with a straw.

We arrived in Shiraz mid-morning but the day was already hot, much hotter than Tehran in the north. Perspiration beaded my forehead as I struggled with my suitcase up the steps of the Shiraz train station, ringed by mountains. Azar had sent me her driver, Jangju, and he stood outside the station holding a hand-written sign saying "Fiona", the letters coloured in felt tip zigzags. Jangju was my age, a handsome man with an elegant moustache and a brand new taxi. He seemed proud of it. It was shining clean, but he wiped an invisible speck of dust from the door with his

handkerchief before opening it. Inside, the seats were covered with clear plastic and I kept my feet together on the spotless mat, lest some train dust mark it. I spoke only one word of Persian, *mot shekerim*, thank you, and even that word not very well. Jangju spoke no English. Together we sped in silence through the outer reaches of Shiraz, and passed over a dry river bed filled with smooth stones, the Khoshk River, victim of a seventeen-year drought.

I watched from the taxi window to see how the local women dressed. Would it be more or less conservative than Tehran? I'd heard that Shiraz was one of Iran's least religious cities, a legacy of its past as a centre for the ancient Persian Zoro'astrian religion, and the founding place of the Baha'i faith, as well as being home to sizeable Jewish and Christian populations. But on the streets, many women walked in black chadors. Carrying shopping bags, they resembled soft, elongated diamonds, their elbows tenting the fine black fabric, their faces ovals of pale skin in a sea of inky black. The word *chador* originally came from ancient Persia, from *čādar*, meaning a sheet or veil. But a few women wore long coats over jeans, and contrasting headscarves perched as far back on their heads as possible, revealing blonde fringes and sweeps of carefully groomed hair.

We came at last to Old Shiraz, and the bazaar. The streets were strung with black pennants, flapping above us, zigzagged across the roads. A vast black flag rippled from a towering flag pole, its edge furling and unfurling in the breeze, stark and sombre against the soft pale blue of the sky. The taxi driver led me down a narrow alleyway with high stone walls. We reached a turquoise double door without a number, pressed with rows of heavy iron studs and two large door knockers. The one on the left, curved and more lightweight, was, I had read, for women, the one on the right, straight and heavy, for men. I trusted the driver knew what he was doing. He used the one on the right.

A tall, elegant woman answered the door. Her hair was short and curled, with a prominent silver streak running down the centre of her head. She had a wildly colourful Indian scarf loosely hanging over her head.

“Ah-ha! Fiona, you're here!” she said. “Welcome, welcome, *welcome!*”

“Jangju! Jangju!” She switched to Persian, saying something rapidly to Jangju, who nodded, holding two grocery bags up for inspection.

“I told him I want the long, sweet melon, not the round one, you know?” Azar said to me as if I knew all about Persian melons. “Did he get the right one?” She peered inside the bag. “Oh, good fellow.”

She fished it out and strode through the narrow entryway, pulling off her headscarf and splicing it on a hook as she passed.

“Take off your scarf, my God, this *hijab*.”

I hesitated a second, then followed Azar’s lead, placing my scarf over hers.

“Come on, come in,” she called, and I hurried into a rectangular courtyard, with a lush citrus tree in its centre. It curved gracefully over an oval pond, where deep orange goldfish swam in turquoise waters. Azar leant over and gently placed the melon in the water where it bobbed alongside the goldfish.

“Persian refrigerator!” she said, by way of explanation. “Now, take a seat.”

The courtyard, surrounded by the house on two sides and by high walls on the remaining two, was like a perfect little box open to the blue sky. There were two carved wooden day beds covered in cushions and Persian carpets, and tall stone ewers in a corner. It was cool and quiet, broken only by the trickle of the pond’s tiny fountain, and the occasional beating of bird wings overhead.

“You must be tired after your long journey,” Azar said. She carried a great deal of barely suppressed energy, and although she instructed me to sit she strode back and forth, fixing the fountain a little higher, trimming some leaves on the citrus tree, rearranging cushions on the day bed.

“It wasn’t too bad,” I began to say, but Azar had already thought of something else and strode into the kitchen, entered from the far corner of the courtyard. “Come into the kitchen,” she called faintly from inside.

I followed her into the coolness of a long low room, with smooth white tiles underfoot and an arched brick ceiling overhead. There were benches around the perimeter, and below them cupboards with cloth curtains hiding glimpses of plates and saucepans.

Azar was already at the stove, putting the kettle on. “How was the train? You know I’ve never taken it, not ever.”

“It was great actually, very modern.”

“You know what? I think it’s too hot today for tea. Let’s have tea later. I’m gonna call my mother down from upstairs and we’ll have *sekanjebeen*.”

“Mama-joon!” Azar strode back out into the courtyard where two flights of stairs, one on each side of the entry, led to the second floor of the house. “Mama-joon!”

An elderly woman, bent almost double with scoliosis and kyphosis, appeared at the top of the stairs. She had short stylish silver hair and wore a jaunty striped jersey with white trousers.

“My mom broke her hip quite recently, in Paris, but she’s made a great recovery.”

Azar’s mother moved cautiously towards the top of the stone stairs.

“Should I help her?” I asked Azar.

“She’s very determined you know, to do it herself. We wait.”

Azar’s mother made her way slowly with the help of a stick in each hand. She looked up at me and smiled every two or three stairs as if to say, *don’t hurry away, I’m coming*.

“You can call her *mama-joon*, it means dearest.” Miriam switched suddenly to French. “Mama-joon, c’est Fiona. Elle est médecin, Australienne,”

“Bonjour madame,” I said, and Mama-joon smiled, her eyes bright and dark and I could see that despite the slow collapse of her body her mind was still lively. She grasped both of my hands in her papery ones, somehow believing that I could speak far more French than I actually did. From that point onward Esta—for that was her name—communicated with me in pidgin French, two non-native speakers making the best of it.

“Assayez-vous,” she said, patting the space next to her on the divan. Sit yourself.

“My mom is eighty-two,” explained Miriam. “She broke her hip, and so now I live with her and help her get back on her feet.”

“She’s French, your mother?”

“No, she’s Persian, but she lived in France for many years. You speak French? Good.” Miriam asked, without waiting for a reply. My French was appalling.

“Now, relax, I’m cooking lunch for you, first we’re going to wash all the herbs, no, first I’m gonna make you the most delicious mint *sharbat*.”

Miriam returned with a tall glass filled with ice and a pale green drink decorated with a sprig of mint. Its outside was frosted with beads of water and I suddenly remembered just how parched I felt.

“Drink up. I made it, my mom’s recipe. Very traditional. You just make a sugar syrup, add the mint, leave it, strain it. *Voila*.” Miriam talked rapidly at all times, and gave equal space to English, French and Farsi.

I sipped. The *sharbat* was refreshing and sweet, tasting of mint, icy cold. I had never felt so glad of a long, quenching drink.

Mama-joon smiled, stirring and sipping her mint *sharbat*.

“Now, when you are ready, we’re going to make lunch. Where did I put those herbs?”

Azar now called out to someone unseen. “Shala! Shala!” She turned to me. “Shala’s helping my mom with the house. She does cooking and so on.” A woman with the heaviness of middle age and a posture of weariness, came to the top of the stairs, carrying a pile of washing. “You know her name means ‘extreme beauty’,” said Azar, winking at me. She said something to Shala, who disappeared into the kitchen and returned with the largest bunch of fresh herbs I had ever seen—mint, coriander, chives, basil and dill, wrapped in newspaper like a giant bouquet of flowers. She smiled shyly at me and unwrapped the herbs, arranging them on a broad metal tray. I wondered what Azar was planning with so many herbs.

“Oh! The *sekanjebeen*!” said Azar. “I totally forgot!” She leapt up and rushed towards the kitchen. “Fiona!”

I rushed to follow. In the kitchen we prepared a tray of tall glasses filled with ice, and Azar took a bottle of pale gold syrup from the shelf.

“This is homemade Persian mint syrup. *Sekanjebeen*. Absolutely perfect for a hot day like today.”

“Is that what we’re making with the herbs?” I asked.

“Those? No, those are for dinner. We call them *sabzi*, greens. A very important part of every Persian meal, as you’ll see.”

We filled the glasses with water and added to each a long-handled spoon for stirring the syrup. Back in the courtyard I sat with Azar, Esta and Shala, sipping the cool mint syrup over ice and preparing the herbs. Four sets of hands trimmed leaves

and stalks, talking and trimming, as the afternoon lengthened and the conversation flowered. Azar translated, English to Persian, Persian to French, French to English, with the same skill and dexterity she applied to the herbs, and the Shiraz air was filled with the sharp, sweet scent of mint, grassy chives and the clean peppery scent of basil.

Chapter Two

Oh, come to Shiraz when the north wind blows!

There abides the angel Gabriel's peace

Hafez

Shiraz was like a garden that, once entered, you never wanted to leave. Shiraz was scented with roses and orange blossoms that drifted white and fragrant on the grass. Shiraz was important and beautiful, like an older woman who knows beauty is only one of her many strengths. I visited the three hundred-year-old Vakil Mosque, on the far side of the carpet bazaar from Azar's house. The pointed arch of the entry was tall and elegant, painted intricately with trees and flowers in shades of pink and turquoise. Inside, a cool flagstone hall ran around the perimeter, and far-off footsteps of invisible patrons echoed softly on the stones. In the centre of the mosque was a vast sun-filled courtyard with a rectangular pool, reflecting the stillness of the sky and the pointed archways of the four vaulted *iwans*, one in each direction. The main dome, the ceiling of heaven, was patterned all over with calligraphy, flowers and stars, the overall effect being one of complex infinity. To one side, the twisting stone columns of the prayer hall were like the trunks of ancient trees, clustered in a forest. There was wisdom here, and peace. In the nearby Vakil Hammam a tiny door led to interconnecting domed rooms with stellate baths, the light coming from pale green and turquoise glass globes set into the roof. In these ancient public baths men and women socialised and bathed in less restrictive times. Now the hammam had become a museum filled with wax figures.

Azar's day was already filled with tasks and visitors coming to her guesthouse, a few doors away from her mother's house, so she had gently suggested I might like to spend the day exploring Shiraz. Or perhaps not so gently. The guesthouse had recently opened, another traditional Shirazi house she had painstakingly renovated. It too had a peaceful courtyard garden, a long pool with fountains, and a line of drooping orange and pomegranate trees. Her guests came from France and Switzerland, independent travellers brave enough to ignore the prevailing sentiments about Iran to venture to Shiraz on their own. The names of the cities they had passed through were like Silk Road secrets—Esfahan, Yazd, Marvdasht, Kashan, Persepolis, and I filed them away in my mind for future use. The night before Azar's older sister Mina had arrived to help with the cooking. I liked her a great deal. Where Azar was tall and slender, with a surfeit of nervous energy, Mina was steadfast, with very long, solid forearms and soft, plump hands. Mina patiently took over the cooking of dinner when she arrived, walking straight into the kitchen to begin preparations. She was a good cook, I could tell. I watched her carefully and saw that she knew just by the smell, the feel or the sound of something if it was cooking the right way. I watched as she made *kotlet*, a tasty meat patty she shaped gently between her hands, having mixed the beef and veal mince with egg, turmeric and grated cooked potato to bind it together, before slipping each one tenderly into bubbling oil to fry. I watched as she listened to Azar's chatter, tended to her mother, and at the same time knew exactly when to turn each patty over so it was golden and crisp. With the herbs we had prepared in the afternoon Mina made *ashe reshteh*, a herby lentil soup with noodles, cooked slowly over a low heat. The recipe for six people used no fewer than nine cups of herbs.

Azar came and went in the kitchen, taking calls on the phone she kept in one pocket and sending furious messages from the other two phones she kept in different pockets.

“Know what you should do tomorrow?” she said to me. “You should go to Vakil Mosque, then Pars Garden, then the fort. It's *great*. You want Jangju to take you? You know the great Karim Khan built it, he was a very impressive man. Jangju can take you. Let me call him.”

“No, really, there’s no need,” I said, having not planned for any sightseeing until I had spent some time cooking..

Azar pulled out one of her three phones and began typing a number, but interrupted herself before the call was placed. “Oh! These French guests. You won’t *believe* it.” she said to Mina and I, first in English for me, then in Persian for Mina. She shook her head vehemently and put the phone down. “Their driver is *terrible*. He’s making them *miserable*. They won’t let him smoke in the car so he stops every five minutes to take a cigarette. Oh my god. All the way from Esfahan like this.” She stood up, took a few steps, sat down again.

Mina moved her head slowly, in time with the gentle circular motions she made with a wooden spoon in the *ashe*.

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. Who was this driver and how was Azar responsible for him? “How far from Esfahan to here?” was all I could think to ask, wondering how many cigarette stops that might equal.

Azar ignored my question. “Now they’re *crawling* through Shiraz because you know all the roads are closed for Ashura.”

“Ashura?” I asked. There it was again. “What’s Ashura, exactly?”

“Honestly, this religion,” said Azar. “I’m tearing out my hairs.” Her hands formed elegant fists at the sides of her head.

I nodded, no wiser. But Azar was already looking at her second phone. “This driver is *murdering* me. Unbelievable.” She looked up. “As I said, tomorrow, Vakil Mosque, the hamam, the Bazaar. Karim Khan Fort. And Persepolis! When will you plan to visit Persepolis?”

I smiled, my cheeks tight with tiredness and effort, and stayed silent. Had I made a terrible mistake in coming here? Would Azar actually have a moment to teach me anything? Perhaps it would be better if I asked Mina if I could cook with her. But how could I broach that?

Let it go, Fiona, I thought to myself. Enjoy the meal, and the moment, and the company.

As we sat in the courtyard, stars overhead now, I noticed how the walls, having absorbed the sun all day, now gently radiated warmth, keeping the temperature constant. The *kotlet* was comforting, eaten with sliced tomatoes, rich and red, and cucumber, flatbread, and pickles. I enjoyed the unusual thick texture of the *ashe reshteh* too, with its herbacious flavour.

Lying in my bed that night in my room off the courtyard, I could hear Azar still making calls and walking in and out of the kitchen. I decided I would think about the cooking again when I'd had more sleep.

For the next three days, whenever Azar was busy - which was often - I left the quietness of the courtyard house and explored the streets of Shiraz. Azar seemed to have a thousand things on her list of tasks, and a thousand problems needing her urgent attention. I didn't want to become one more of them.

"Tomorrow you'll see Persepolis, Jangju will take you," said Azar, flying out of the house and pulling on her headscarf as she left. "I have to sort out these French guests. Then day after tomorrow, my good friend Zeba, she's the best, she's gonna teach you how to make *fesenjun*."

I took myself to the Pars Museum, a tiny jewel of a building inside the Nazar Garden, planted with orange and cumquat trees. It had once been the garden pavilion of kings of the Zand Dynasty, now it housed a collection of calligraphy and paintings. The paintings surprised me, and what I thought I knew of Islamic art. They depicted voluptuous women and gentle men playing instruments, dancing, eating pomegranates, both sexes adorned in pearls and silks. But outside the pavilion Shiraz seemed to be mourning, a rose garden draped in black. I had done some reading of my own and understood now that Ashura, "the tenth day" commemorated the death of Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and members of his family in 680 CE. For ten days the country descended into mourning. The streets were hung with black flags, and even the children wore black. When I left the Pars Museum I could hear sorrowful singing. My feet traced it to the Algheband carpet bazaar, converted into a women-only *majlis*, a mourning assembly. I stood at the door and watched as hundreds of women, dressed all in black, sat on rich carpets under the domed roof of the bazaar, dimly lit by shafts of sunlight streaming through heavy glass balls set in the roof. A mullah in a black turban and dark robes sang, deep and mournfully, and I could make out the name "Hossein". At this, the women placed their right hands over their heart, beating their chests, and tears streamed down their faces.

It stirred something in me, the sorrowful notes of the mullah and this vision of women drawn together in a common grief. Yet at the same time I didn't understand the depth of their emotion. How could they be grieving for something that happened more than a thousand years before they were born? Azar was simply impatient with the disruptions and inconvenience, when she and I had a moment to talk about it. "Ashurah is like a government enforced holiday, because no one is really that religious," she said. "They have parades, and plays, and all this desperate *singing*." She rolled her eyes. "The whole country just...stops. For ten days."

There seemed to be nothing for it but to wait. Wait for Ashura to end and life to return to normal, wait for Azar's guests to return to Tehran. Wait to meet Azar's friend Zeba, and cook with her. And it gave me a chance to catch Matt and the girls despite the difficult time difference. The only place in the house with a signal strong enough was at the top of the stairs leading from the courtyard to Esta's bedroom, so when she was awake and dressed I perched on the highest stair next to the scented geraniums.

"Bella!" It's Mum."

"Hi Mum, how's Iran?" Bella asked.

"Beautiful," I said. "Everything about this country is beautiful." If I craned my head back I could see the pink ceiling of Esta's bedroom, painted in traditional Persian style with nightingales and flowers, like the canopy of a forest filled with birds. "But also they're in the middle of this mourning festival."

"A what festival?"

"Mourning. You know, like when somebody dies."

"That doesn't really sound like a festival. Who died?"

"The Prophet Mohammad's grandson, a very, very long time ago. It's kind of like a long public holiday, but everyone wears black."

"Uh-huh. How's your cooking going?" she asked.

"Well, Azar, the lady I'm staying with, is quite busy at the moment. So I'm eating lots of good food but I haven't done any cooking yet. What are you having for dinner?"

"Not sure. Dad's gone to the shops with Lily to buy something."

“Oh. Okay, can you let them know I’ll try and speak to them later?”

“Sure Mum, Love you!”

Just as Azar had promised, on the morning of my third day in Shiraz Jangju collected me in his unblemished taxi and together we drove north-east out of the city. An hour later, after passing through villages and farmland, we approached Persepolis down a long avenue lined with trees, with Mount Mithra forming a dramatic backdrop to the ancient ceremonial city of the Achaemenid kings. It had been built by Darius the Great in 518 BC, and completed by his successor Xerxes. The palaces of Persepolis were a triumph of architecture and beauty, advanced for their time and decorated with precious stones and finely carved friezes.

Jangju said something to me in Persian, then pointed to his watch, and to the ticket office by the gate.

“I think you’re telling me you’ll collect me in three hours, right beside the gate?” I punched the time we were to meet into my phone and showed Jangju, just to be sure, fixing my head scarf before I got out of the car. Jangju smiled and nodded emphatically, and pointed again to our meeting place.

Then I was on my own. Around me were Persian families, taking advantage of Ashura to spend the day visiting Iran’s most famous historic site. Many were enjoying picnics in the gardens, reclining on the grass with fruits and breads, just like the paintings in the Pars Museum. Others were exploring the ruins, and I could see them in the distance among the lower reaches of Mount Mithra. I climbed the broad stone stairs towards the Gate of All Nations, the sandstone gleaming gold in the late morning sun. Huge winged mythical beasts, half ox, half man, guarded the Gate’s entrance to the Apadana Palace. Around their magnificent flanks were the scribblings of thousands of historic vandals who had felt it necessary to carve their names. One read, in typical understated colonial style, of “Cap. John Malcolm, Envoy Extraordinary, Pleni-Potentiary,” another, C.D.Bruijn 1704, the Dutch painter. Yet another “Stanley NEW YORK HERALD 1870.” Layers of successive sacrilege over centuries.

Here, passing between the winged sphinxes as I had just done, the subjects of the vast kingdom would arrive every year at the time of the spring equinox to pay tribute to King Xerxes. Persepolis was eventually lost to time and the desert sands, and lay this way for more than two millennia before its rediscovery, but the sand had carefully preserved the parade of guests in great detail, in the stone friezes lining the staircases and walls. Northern Armenians, Egyptians, Babylonians, all came bearing gifts for the king at the spring equinox celebration of Nowruz, Persian New Year—lotus blossoms, quince, pomegranates, incense, fatted lambs. I marvelled at the carvings, the fine details of the faces, hands and dress of the guests unchanged in two and a half millennia. Several pairs of guests held hands as they arrived and there was a sense of attending a joyful party.

I wandered amongst the columns, some standing, some laid gracefully on their sides on the earth, of the Apadana Palace and the Treasury. Records from Persepolis bear witness to an advanced civilization where female workers were paid the same as their male counterparts, with the benefit of paid maternity leave. Twice as much if they had twins. How did we lose those gains over the last two thousand years? Persepolis eventually fell to Alexander the Great and his army. He burnt it to the ground, and needed 33,000 camels to cart away the loot found within the King's treasury.

Carved into the hillside above Persepolis were two vast tombs of the kings, set deep into the foot of the mountain, and carved with the ancient winged Zoroastrian symbol of Faravahar. From the terrace of the tombs I looked out over the broad plain, the sun lower now in the sky, the ruins of Persepolis spread out impressively below me. It would be a great place for watching the sun set, I thought. But not today. Jangju would be waiting for me in a few minutes, and it was a long walk back down the mountain to the gate. A storm cloud was building on the horizon.

As we sped back through farms to Shiraz, Jangju played the kind of music I had been hearing in the streets of Shiraz, soulful and sad, a man singing against a slow background beat.

“Ashura?” I asked.

“Hossein,” Jangju said, nodding. His eyes filled with tears, but I didn’t know what to say.

That night, Azar was at last free from her guests, who were dining in one of Shiraz’s fancier restaurants. Esta had turned in early so Azar and I ate together in the courtyard, a simple meal of *ab gosht*, a lamb stew with chickpeas and tomatoes, eaten with bread and fresh herbs. It seemed that, given a choice, Persians loved nothing more than to eat outdoors under the sky. Every garden I had visited over the last few days had been filled with families and young couple enjoying picnics. The storm clouds over Persepolis that afternoon had vanished without a drop of rain.

“I’m gonna get us some *arak*,” said Azar, getting up from the carpet she had spread on the stone floor for us to sit on. I could feel the warmth of the stones underneath me.

“Arak?” I asked. “Isn’t that alcoholic?” As a strictly Muslim country alcohol was banned in Iran. Except, apparently, when it wasn’t.

“Ha!” said Azar. “We might be Muslims but we’re not saints.” She returned with an unmarked bottle of clear liquor and two glasses filled with ice and a little water. “It tastes best with ice,” she said, pouring in the arak and handing me one. “You know all the young kids drink it too, they take a water bottle filled with arak into the restaurant or club and when nobody is looking they pour it in their orange juice.”

I laughed, and took a sip. It had a sweet aniseed smell but the taste was a kick of pure alcohol and I gasped involuntarily.

“Strong, huh?” said Azar. “Sip it slowly.”

“Where do you get it from? I’m guessing you can’t just walk into an Iranian supermarket and ask for a bottle.”

“Black market,” said Azar. “I know this little Armenian Jewish lady. She distills it at home. Here’s the best part, though. She delivers it by carrying one flagon in each hand under her chador! Perfect for smuggling!”

I laughed at the image of all the secret things carried under chadors, leopard-print underwear, contraband alcohol.

A sweet, smoky smell wafted down into the courtyard from over the side wall.

“Opium,” said Azar. “That family next door, they’re Afghani. I often smell the opium in the evenings. Hashish too.”

I looked surprised. “Hashish? Opium? Isn’t that risky?” I’d heard that Iran’s religious police would fine you for applying lipstick in your car. What might the punishment be for smoking opium?

Azar leaned forward, conspiratorially. “You know Shala?”

I nodded, Esta’s new housekeeper.

“Shala has to work so hard because her husband is an idiot. He bought two kilograms of hashish from the Afghanis and dug a hole and hid it under the stones in his courtyard. But he couldn’t stop telling everyone how clever he was, and how rich he would be when he sold it. He was waiting for the price to go up, like US dollars.” Azar laughed grimly.

“And what happened?” I asked, unable to help myself, despite feeling bad at Shala’s expense.

“Shala’s cousin became jealous and told the police.”

“No!”

“Now her husband’s in jail. He tried to tell them he needed two kilograms for personal use. Ha.”

Poor Shala, I thought, supporting two children, an elderly mother, and in idiot husband. At least in the west it was slightly easier to divorce your husband if he turned out to be bad news. Azar and I sipped our arak, lost in our own thoughts for a moment.

“Men are such idiots,” she said.

I nodded, although that’s not how I felt about most men, and especially not Matt.

“Take my husband Claude,” said Azar.

Azar mentioned her husband often—he was a big oil company executive in Geneva, a clever man and very successful.

“He’s being such an idiot right now, but I think he’ll snap out of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pass me that little bag, would you Fiona?” Azar asked. She took a tiny bottle of bronze nail polish out of the bag and began carefully painting her toenails, one by one.

I waited patiently for her to resume.

“Claude has taken up with a Mexican woman,” she said. “He told me he needed to go sailing in the Mediterranean for three months to find himself, he was so stressed. Turns out she was with him too, helping him find himself.”

Azar looked up at me now for the first time, confusion all over her handsome face. “Here am I telling him, it’s okay my darling, you do what you have to do for stress, and he’s with her!”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m just gonna play it cool,” Azar said. “He’ll come back. He’ll realise he’s being a complete idiot. She just wants his money.”

“Oh Azar,” I said. “I’m so, so sorry. How awful.”

Suddenly all the nervous energy, the frenetic busyness made sense. Azar was keeping herself fully occupied so she didn’t have to think about her marriage.

“When did this happen?” I asked.

“A couple of months ago. He made sure I was busy with this project in Shiraz, with the guest house, so he could carry on behind my back.”

I saw the pain now in her face, and a flash of anger.

“But he’s not getting out of the marriage that easily. He doesn’t know how strong I am.”

With that Azar gave me a defiant look and lifted her arak glass. “Here’s to strength.”

Chapter 3

*I wish I could show you,
When you are lonely or in darkness,
The Astonishing Light
of your own Being!*

Hafiz

When I opened my eyes the next morning my head pounded behind my eyes at the brightness. I closed them again and rolled towards the wall. I made a note not to drink arak again whilst talking about marital problems. I was to spend the day cooking with Azar's friend Zeba, so I rifled through my bag until I found some paracetamol and took two, followed by two aspirin a short time after that.

At breakfast, I cooked myself two fried eggs, their yolks like melted butter, and after that felt a little better.

Azar brought me a cup of strong coffee. "My mom doesn't know about Claude," she whispered, although Mama-joon was still making her way to the table.

"Okay," I mouthed. "Mina?"

Azar nodded. "She knows."

We didn't discuss it further.

Zeba arrived to collect me. She was a stylish woman, older than me, with bobbed brown hair and a calm and easy way of moving that seemed to conserve energy, unlike the barely suppressed energy of Azar.

"Come, Fiona," she said as she arrived. "Today two things is happening. We're making *khoresht fesenjun*, which is pomegranate syrup with walnut, and with chicken. You tried it before?"

"No," I said. "I've never tried it."

"Well, you're going to like it."

Zeba and I left Azar's house and she flagged a taxi. Shiraz taxis were mostly old Iranian-made Hillman Hunters, boxy and stylish, and surprisingly robust given they were all now fifty years old.

"And the second thing?" I asked when we got in.

“Second thing?” said Zeba. She had already forgotten.

“You like these old taxis?” Zeba asked a question of our driver, a soft man in slouchy clothes and a full head of dark, curly hair. “The driver says the British brought this car to Iran. Iran didn’t make cars, so this was the very first foreign adaptation of cars and they were *good*. They’re all still going!”

The taxi driver interjected now, and he and Zeba had a back-and-forth exchange.

“Actually they weren’t good at first. He says when they started making them the cars had *so* many issues, even Pakistan refused to buy it from us. Pakistan! They said this is rubbish. India said no way. Why? Because the belt doesn’t work. The brakes doesn’t work. The sound system doesn’t work. The door doesn’t lock.”

But somewhere along the way the old Hillman Hunters became an Iranian classic, the Paykan, with improved design and reliability. When the Iranian Revolution came, by necessity they had to last because sanctions meant no imported parts were available. Now, the Paykans were indestructible little work horses of Shiraz’s roads.

We pulled into the driveway of Zeba’s house, a grand two-story home in a leafy suburb of south Shiraz.

“When my husband is here, there is a lot of entertainment, friends coming.”

“Where is he now?” I asked. The house was quiet and dim, the curtains drawn. Zeba walked through the formal sitting room full of heavy brocade chairs with finely turned legs, and tugged open the damask curtains.

“He’s in the States with my kids,” Zeba said. “He’s a maxillofacial surgeon, and he can’t retire. I mean, he’s already seventy but he just keeps going!”

“So you’re just here visiting?” I asked

“I came home to Shiraz for two months and...would you like some tea?...I’m stuck here for the time being to sort out a few things. It’s been almost a year.”

“Come into the kitchen,” Zeba said.

The kitchen sat looking out over the vegetable garden, and I could tell it was Zeba’s favourite part of the house. It was as light as the sitting room was dark, as relaxed as the sitting room was formal. Everything in it was spotless and gleamed in the sun streaming through the kitchen windows. It looked like it hadn’t changed in the last fifty years, just like the Paykan. The wooden cupboards sat below a long

marble bench, and walls were tiled in sunshine-yellow patterns. In the centre was an enormous old O’Keefe & Merritt enamel stove, daffodil coloured, with six burners and a sleek rectangular clock with arrow hands set into the back.

“Let’s put the tea on, then start the *fesenjun*,” Zeba said, filling an old kettle and turning on the burner. “There are a lot of steps in this dish.”

“First we’re going to cook the chicken, simmer it with water and onions and turmeric.” She gently placed a small chicken in a casserole dish and set it over a low flame. “When the quality of the chicken is good and you boil it gently the extract will come out.”

“You mean the chicken stock?”

“Exactly. Now we toast the walnuts, ground walnuts, and a little bit of warming it up with no oil, nothing else.”

The kitchen filled with the oily smell of the walnuts as Zeba shook the frypan gently to make sure they didn’t burn.

“Now we’re going to add a little of the water from the chicken, and a bit of the onion.” Zeba stirred them together, and let it simmer for a few minutes.

“Will you simmer it for long enough that the walnuts go soft?” I asked.

“Exactly, yes, said Zeba. And the oil of the walnut will come out. You’ll see we didn’t put any oil in it. The oil you see is the oil of the walnut. You have to be very patient with this because the slower the simmer, the more oil will come out.”

“Where are you living in the States?” I asked Zeba as she stirred.

“Cleveland, Ohio.”

“I haven’t been to Cleveland. Is it a lovely city?” I asked.

“It’s not,” said Zeba matter-of-factly. “Snowy, very bad weather in winter, hot and humid in summer.”

“But you like it?”

She laughed, as if to say, *Fiona, nobody likes Cleveland*. “I have to because my husband is working there.”

Suddenly I understood why Zeba’s two-month trip might have stretched to a year. How had she and her husband managed this elective separation? Zeba seemed perfectly content with it, but as much as I wanted to ask her I couldn’t.

“We’re going to add the pomegranate syrup now, and then the very slow cooking begins,” said Zeba.

Zeba took a plain plastic bottle filled with a dark red syrup, and poured a stream of the thick liquid into the walnut mixture. She dripped a little on a teaspoon for me to taste— it had a rich raisin sweetness and tart sourness together.

“Is it homemade?” I asked.

“Yes, everything here in my kitchen is homemade. The syrups, the pickles, all of it.”

“How do you make pomegranate syrup?” I asked.

“Oh, it’s a ceremony. It’s a ritual. It’s a ritual. You know they peel...” Zeba bent down to reduce the heat under the pan even further. “This should be very, very low. Very low. Because it burns so quickly. Yes, Paveen, my family friend, has a huge garden full of pomegranates in Yazd. So at the right season they bring people, they cut them, wash them, peel them until it is just the pomegranate seeds. Then they boil them. Then they extract out the juice and start boiling it until this *huge* amount becomes this little.” Zeba pinched her thumb and forefinger together with one hand, while stirring the pot gently with the other. The walnut and pomegranate together had a pleasant smell, like cooking jam. “So one spoon of pomegranate sauce would be about forty or thirty pomegranates.”

Zeba took a little of the warm jammy mixture and spooned some into the palm of her hand where she let it cool before tasting it, then did the same for me.

“The walnuts are nice and soft now,” I said.

“Hmm. But it’s really important to cook it very low. Don’t let it burn. My kids love this dish,” said Zeba. “When I travel back to the States I have to take my own pomegranate syrup with me, I bottle it up very tightly so it doesn’t spill. I’m gonna show you some photos.”

Zeba pulled out her phone and showed me a picture of what looked like a portable Persian supermarket. There were jars of sour cherry jam, carrot jam and bottles of pomegranate syrup, mint cordial, and lime juice. There were carefully labelled packets of Iranian limes and dried mint and saffron.

“Wow,” I said, impressed. “I hope your kids appreciate this effort.”

“Every Persian mother has to do it like this, so you can cook their favourite dish.”

“Such lucky kids!” I said. “How many do you have?”

“I have two. My daughter lives in Los Angeles, she’s a doctor,” said Zeba. “And my son also lives in California. He had a hard start to his life. “

I looked at Zeba to see what she meant.

“He was born just after the Revolution had begun, so you know, the country was crazy. He was born with a cleft lip and palate.”

“Oh! That’s hard,” I said. Babies with cleft palates needed surgery urgently to close the gap inside their mouths so that they could feed and gain weight. The surgery was specialised - exactly the kind of surgery Zeba’s husband carried out. “Could you get an operation for him?”

“My husband was the only doctor in Iran at the time who could do the surgery. But he refused to operate on his own son, he said it would be too difficult, too heartbreaking.”

“Really?” I tried to imagine being in his position, and realised I had been there many times before with my own children. Not for operations, but for serious illnesses. You did what was necessary for your child, and put your own feelings aside. “What did you do?”

“The country was upside down. I needed to get him out, to England, or America, to get the surgery he needed, but of course it was impossible. Every day he was losing weight. I was *desperate* for him.”

Zeba stirred the *fesenjun* some more, then turned off the heat. “Come, we sit and have tea and let the taste develop.” She said. She poured two cups of strong black tea from the pot, and put out some sweet cardamom shortbreads onto a plate.

“Tell me what happened then,” I said, biting the shortbread. The cardamom was strong and fragrant.

“Well, I realised that if I wanted him to live I would do whatever it took. I bundled up my daughter, who was two, and my baby son, and I went to Tehran to try and get us out of the country. Nothing worked. Finally, I heard that the new health minister was an old medical student friend of my husbands. It was madness, all those young men and women becoming ministers in the government. But I talked my way in to his office, with my two children, and I told him who we were, and what we needed. There was a freight plane leaving Tehran that night to England. He put us on it. I had two tiny children and an even tinier suitcase, all by myself. I was terrified.”

I looked at Zeba with new admiration. Her calm demeanour hid a fiery spirit.

“And the surgery?” I asked.

“It was a success. Afterwards, I didn’t come back to Iran for many, many years. My husband had to stay here. So, that was hard.”

Zeba’s eyes moistened, but her voice never wavered. “Tell me about your children,” she said.

“I have two girls, fifteen and twelve. The older one, Bella is very calm and quiet. The younger one, Lily, is very funny. They’re both beautiful, at least, I think so.” I showed Zeba photographs of the girls.

“And your husband? Is he also a doctor?”

I laughed. “No, he studied art, but now he’s a businessman.” I looked down at my hands, suddenly embarrassed. What more could I say without revealing too much? Zeba asked no more about him. Can other women tell when a topic should be skirted? I guessed so. At least until we knew one another better.

We returned to the *fesenjun*, still warm on the stove. By now the chicken had poached and Zeba removed the soft flesh, tearing it into smaller pieces. These she stirred through the *fesenjun*.

“So you know Fiona, according to the taste of yourself, or whoever you want to serve, I add a little bit of sugar right at the end. Some people use pomegranate syrup made from sour pomegranates, and put sugar next to the table so whoever likes it sweet, can add sugar. I usually like it sweet-sour.” Zeba’s phone rang. It was Azar. “She wants to know when we’re coming back for lunch. I told her soon, but we’re still cooking.”

Zeba and I and the taxi driver made a little procession towards Azar’s house behind the carpet bazaar, carrying an assortment of pots wrapped in special quilted pot-carriers to keep them insulated, and baskets of pickles and condiments. The *fesenjun* was inside one Zeba carried. I couldn’t wait to taste it.

“Zeba! Smells wonderful,” said Azar, taking delivery of the various dishes. “Shala! Mama-joon!” she called out to the house. “Lunch!”

With Shala’s help, we set the table with fresh plates and the *fesenjun*, dark red-brown and mysterious. I leaned over to take in the heady, raisiny roasted walnut aroma of chicken. Zeba had also made *lubia polo*, a saffron rice dish with green beans to offset the richness of the *fesenjun*. Zeba handed me a jar of preserved

Iranian limes, salted and spiced with a sharp, astringent taste. “This will be very tasty with the *lubia polo*,” Zeba said.

Azar and Shala brought a pate of green herbs, another of bread, a third with finely chopped cucumber, tomato and onion, what Azar called Shirazi salad.

At last we all sat, Shala included.

“Try this incredible *fesenjun* Fiona,” Azar said, handing me a plate.

I was seduced by the first mouthful—the tart sweetness of the pomegranate syrup and the richness of ground walnuts, with the soft, tender chicken. It was too rich to eat more than a few mouthfuls, and then only with the sharp contrast of the Shirazi salad and the preserved limes.

“Zeba, that is one of the most delicious things I have ever eaten,” I said to Zeba.

She smiled a secret smile as if to say, *I know*.

“Fiona, tomorrow Mina is going to teach you to make sholeh-zard. Persian dessert.”

“Perfect for Ashura,” said Zeba.

“Yes, perfect. And then we have dinner with Navid’s sister Vida and her friends. You’re gonna *love* them, they’re all great cooks but also very, very successful. You should see the kind of meal they prepare. *Spec-tac-ular*.”

In Kashgar, I had only one teacher, Meryam. But here in Shiraz, my education in Persian food was going to be a collective effort, surrounded by women—intelligent, interesting women with lives that were complex and existed outside their husbands and children.

“Tonight I’m taking you to Hafeziyah,” Azar said after lunch. Her voice no longer had such urgency, and something in her had calmed since last night.

“Hafeziyah?” I asked. “What is it?”

“It’s the tomb of Hafez, the famous Persian poet. He was from Shiraz, but his tomb is inside a beautiful garden. All the young people go there after dark, because there are a lot of nooks and crannies in the mausoleum.” Azar winked at me.

“Actually Hafeziyah has the most incredible *energy*, I love it there.”

Jangju, always available, even late at night, arrived to collect us. Azar, me and mama-joon, who was going to take her wheelchair to make it easy to get around

the gardens. She was dressed in a beautiful white head scarf that made her look almost angelic.

Street food sellers crowded the gates of Hafeziyah, selling spiced broad beans and luscious hot cooked beetroots on sticks, like toffee apples. The taxis and motorbikes were three deep at the entrance, dropping off and collecting visitors. Inside, we entered a garden filled with tall cyprus trees and orange groves. A long pool reflected the night sky and the garden beds were filled with roses, geraniums and jasmine, its heady scent filling the air. It was crowded with young couples as Azar promised, but also entire families, and young children, and grandparents. I could tell from the brightness in Mama-joon's eyes how much she loved coming here, surrounded by people.

"Come Fiona," said Azar. "I'm gonna show you the actual tomb."

We climbed the broad white marble steps and walked toward a delicate domed octagonal pavilion, lit from inside with a gentle light. The white marble sarcophagus within was carved all over with Persian calligraphy. Someone had left a single red rose in its centre.

"Isn't it amazing?" asked Azar. "Can't you just feel that energy?"

I tried very hard to feel it, but nothing came. At that time I knew nothing of Hafez's poetry or fame, of how he had influenced everyone who came after him, from Goethe to Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle.

"Yes," I replied to Azar, not truthfully. "Yes, I can."

In the garden behind the pavilion a small crowd had gathered. An older man was reading from a very ornate leather-bound book.

"What is he doing?" I asked Azar.

"Ah!" she said. "It's a Persian tradition. See the book he has? It's the Divan of Hafez, all of his poetry. Now at Nowruz, at New Year we like to do this. We choose a random page and read out what it says. Like fortune telling for the year ahead."

"So this man is doing the same thing for people in the crowd?"

"You pay him, and he chooses a random reading for you."

We moved closer, watching and listening, Azar translating.

"Let's do one for my you," she said.

Azar paid the man a small amount, and he closed the book then re-opened it with a flourish. I recognised it as the book that Mama-joon kept beside her bed, the one I had assumed was the Quran.

As Mama-joon and Azar listened, he read a few lines of poetry in Persian.

“What did he say?” I asked Azar. I loved the performance of fortune-telling, but believed and disbelieved in equal measure.

“Well, I’m not sure how it relates to you,” said Azar. “It’s part of a poem about those birds who—poof!—become fire, then ashes, then they rise up. What do you call them?”

“A phoenix?”

“Yes, a poem about two phoenixes, rising up again.”

Azar shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m not sure either,” I said. I hadn’t undergone any trial by fire, reduced to ashes and ready to rise again. Not all readings were prophecies. I started to walk back towards the gate, with Azar and Mama-joon being pushed along gently in her wheelchair by Jangju. Or were they?

Chapter Four

Every day is Ashura, and every place is Karbala.

Shi'a Muslim saying

The important tenth day of Ashura was approaching and signs of its presence increased daily in the streets. Ordinary cars were painted with the name of Hossein in giant letters, dripping blood across the doors and back windscreens. Zeba told me that the men who painted cars for Ashura did it for free. It wasn't permanent—you could wash it off once Ashura was over, quite easily. Still, without being able to read the Farsi script it disturbed me, too close to the images of terrorists on television. That was unfair, and now I had to check myself every time I caught my mind at it again, conflating one with the other. It didn't help that Shiraz was cloaked in black - black-clothed men and women in the streets, black drapes in the bazaar, and black banners and flags roosting like crows on all the roofs in the city.

In the last ten days ten days I had learned to cook a little, with Zeba, and with Azar's sister Mina. I had eaten plenty of good Persian food too, but I hadn't been able to make the same kind of close connection with Azar that I hoped for. I thought that being able to converse together easily in English might have removed some of the barriers to conversation that I had with Meryam. But Azar was busy, and only getting busier during my stay. She worked hard, up at sunrise to prepare a typical Persian breakfast for her guests—soft *barbari* bread, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, feta cheese, and figs. I had taken to rising early to help her, sometimes our only chance to chat and drink a coffee as we worked.

“Don't forget the jams!” Azar said.

Persians adored jam and breakfast was incomplete without several choices, spread over the soft barbarian's bread. My favourite was the rose petal jam, delicately scented and sweet as Turkish delight. I spooned it into a cut glass dish and took it to the table along with dishes of sour cherry, carrot jam, and fig. Outside, the first mournful notes of the call to prayer came from Vakil Mosque. I thought again about Ashura.

“I still don't understand Ashura,” I said to Azar. “Why is everything black, and dripping with blood?”

“You know Fiona, it’s like national mourning. This Ashura goes back, way back, to the time of Mohammed.” she replied.

“To the Battle of Karbala?” I asked. I had read about the massacre of Hossein and his family members, Shi’a Muslims, by an army of Sunni Muslims, but I still didn’t understand.

“You should go see the *ta’zieh* inside the bazaar today. It’s like a play that explains the story of Ashura.”

“That would be good,” I said. “Do I need a ticket?”

“Ticket? No, it’s like a public performance. Just follow the crowds after lunch sometime and you’ll find it.”

“Anyone can go?”

“Anyone can go.”

So I did, having nothing better to do. I had tried calling Matt, then Bella, then Lily. They were all busy, a normal school and work day for them. Azar was busy with her new group of guests and besides, she’d lived through fifty Ashuras and it didn’t hold the same fascination for her as it did for me.

At the entrance to the Vakil bazaar harried families rushed past me through the crowds to get to the *ta’zieh* performances on time. I followed. Inside the bazaar, all the shops were closed except for those selling Ashura paraphernalia. Children, distracted by the colourful offerings, pleaded with their parents for a pint-sized drum or chain whips, or a black flag with “Hossein” written in letters dripping with blood. I stopped to admire the broad banners hung on the walls of the bazaar, each one hand-stitched to show a scene from the Battle of Karbala. In one, a man lay bleeding on the ground, neatly stitched spears sprouting from his chest. Beside him a horse reared, its headless rider sprouting gushes of embroidered blood from the stump of his neck. The missing head was applied on the ground nearby, staring out from under a helmet topped with a curving feather.

Families brushed past me, their children fidgeting and overexcited, their mothers pulling them along by their hands. The children wore costumes, the boys in green and white, the girls in robes of green with matching headscarves. The babies, carried ever so gently in their fathers’ arms, wore costumes of green, black and white

with tiny matching headbands, lettering printed across their foreheads. I didn't know what it said. Some infants wore a garland of gold leaves on a fine gold string worn diagonally across their chests. More than anything, it reminded me of the scenes outside a primary school half an hour before the nativity play starts, with miniature shepherds, small wise men, tiny angels and the baby Jesus being urged to hurry up by their exasperated parents.

I followed them all to the grand domed hall in the centre of the bazaar, a place used in years gone by for public meetings and performances like this one. The ceiling, far above, was patterned with eight-pointed stars and turquoise tiles, and around the hall eight decorative arches pointed towards eight halls, each leading away like spokes on a wheel. Where there was previously an open space with shoppers walking to and fro, there was now a circular stage just a few feet high. Around it, families sat in closely packed rows of chairs, and behind them everyone else jostled for standing room. The men in the audience wore black button-up shirts and black trousers. The women, seated together, wore black chadors without any hint of colour today. I felt very out of place, wearing a floral top Azar had lent me and a light pink headscarf. Although nobody stared or looked askance, it felt like wearing board shorts to the opera, or a funeral. Because it was a funeral of sorts, repeated every year for 1300 years.

The *ta'zieh* was already underway, and several men in costume occupied the stage, parading in a circle to loud recorded music of many trumpets in chorus, at once both familiar and foreign. Like a pantomime, it seemed some players were professionals, but many were amateurs. There seemed to be a villain dressed in red and black, with a sword and a helmet topped by a long red feather. The crowd booed loudly and enthusiastically every time he appeared, which was often. The hero, Hossein, was easier to spot, all in green and white, with a curving green feather topping his helmet. Then there were the others—Hossein's brethren, I guessed, and a small baby played by a real baby, and a man all in white save his silver helmet. There were many children participating too, and I suddenly understood the rush of families trying to arrive on time for their child's part. Like a nativity play, there was a part for every child, playing a minor role or parading in groups, their parents proudly taking photographs and videos on their smartphones.

And like a nativity play watched by a visitor from another culture and language, I had almost no concept of what was happening. Ta'zieh was a passion play, a religious tragedy performed during Ashura as a re-enactment of the tragic battle of Karbala. with Hossein, his sister Zaynab and his brother Abbas the archetypal heroes, and Yazid the villain, in red.

The real story, of course, was lost to history but the fundamentals were tragic. They explained the split between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims that has held strong to this day. The prophet's only surviving child was Fatima, and those who followed her and her husband, Ali, become Shi'ali, or Shi'a, followers of Ali. The powerful religious caliphs, the caliphate, however, wanted to wrest power from Ali and his followers. After Ali and Fatima's deaths they plotted to wipe out the Prophet's descendants for good, and almost succeeded at a place called Karbala, now in Iraq. It was never a fair fight. Yazid, with an army numbering twenty thousand, trapped Hossein and his family between the desert and the river, cutting off their supply of water and determined to force Hossein into a humiliating pledge of allegiance or else die of thirst. By the ninth day, known as The Day of the Great Thirst, Hossein, his brother Abbas, sister Zaynab and their children were delirious with dehydration. Hossein knew Yazid would kill them all but hoped that by riding out into battle on the tenth day the women and children might be spared. His own death was certain. On his last night Hossein laid a great and imaginary feast before his companions, spread with the food and drink of Paradise. Starving and thirsty, they ate and drank their fill of this invisible meal, and continued the night deep in prayer. At morning light on the tenth day, Ashura, he and seventy-two of his companions and family were slaughtered by Yazid's army. Abbas had all his limbs severed while trying to get water for the children, Hossein was speared and beheaded, his body trampled but his head taken as a trophy of war.

Zaynab, watching her brothers martyred, spoke the words that divided Islam forever. "I am the granddaughter of Mohammed. I am the daughter of Fatima. You," she said, pointing to Yazid. "You have shed the blood of the sons of the Holy Prophet and have hidden the brilliant stars on the earth under the clouds of oppression and injustice. You shall go before Allah soon. And at that time you will

wish that you had been blind and dumb and had not said that it was a day of rejoicing for your ancestors.”

Zaynab’s words, the religion of Islam would remain forever divided.

As the *ta’zieh* progressed, the crowd grew still, watching, listening. I tried to follow the story—here was Yazid telling Hossein to bow down or be slaughtered; here were the children crying for water: here was Abbas, killed as he tried to get water for the children, losing first one arm, then the other. At every injustice the crowd put their hands over their hearts, murmuring Hossein’s name. Then I began to notice that many in the crowd were weeping, tears pouring from their eyes as they watched, wrapt. By the time Hossein’s baby son was killed, an arrow through his chest, then Hossein himself was beheaded, every member of the crowd had eyes filled with tears. I tried so hard not to stare. Why were they crying? This had all happened many centuries ago. It made no sense to me, but I imagined there were layers to the story that rendered it important culturally.

Afterwards, I followed the flow of the crowd out of the bazaar and into the streets, closed for the Ashura parade that would occur later. The crowd was most dense around the ice cream shop, frantic with trade, where black-clothed families jostled for a cone of pure white soft serve, or a long crispy pastry drenched in rosewater syrup. Grief will make you hungry that way.

I followed the crowds now to the streets past Vakil Mosque. Azar was right, all the roads were closed for the Ashura parades. She had told me everyone would be out watching but I had no idea what form they would take. A funeral procession, sombre and slow? Or a kind of *ta’zieh* of the streets? Thousands of people lined both sides of the main street of Shiraz, young and old, women and children. Everyone wore black, and as the afternoon sun bore down I sweated, a trickle running under my breasts. The feeling in the crowd was not sombre, in contrast to the bazaar. There was an excited buzz of anticipation, an almost festive atmosphere. Onlookers shuffled themselves aside to make space for me and I found myself in the front row. In the distance I heard drumming, heartbeat-slow and dull at first, then louder and closer. In the distance I could see the procession marching toward us. It was led by

ten men abreast carrying a vast standard decorated with the shapes of swords and peacocks, draped with patterned silks and topped with plumes of green and white ostrich feathers. Hossein's standard. Behind it rolled what appeared to be a miniature gypsy caravan on wheels, decorated with coloured lights, mirrors and flowers, and laid with palm fronds. Later, I was told it was a *hejleh*, a votive dedicated to unmarried male martyrs, like Hossein's baby son. Behind the *hejleh*, hundreds of men in long rows of black stepped slowly to the beat of an enormous drum, bigger than a car, rolled on its own heavy trolley. Amongst them the mullah, in his turban and gown, began to sing a song of deepest sorrow. Its notes were filled with heartache and grief, and they touched me despite myself. Beside me the crowd stilled and again put their right hand over their heart. In time to the beat of the drum some of the onlookers beat their own chests, softly, gently, in time with the rhythm.

Now the men in the parade lifted chain whips and began beating their own backs with the lengths of chain. I found it immediately confronting. I tried to back away, but I was hemmed in by the crowds and a slight anxiety took hold. What would happen next? Would I be able to get out, get away? Young boys, old men with whitest hair, and strong youths flagellated themselves with short chain whips. The chains made a soft rhythmic clink as they hit their mark, and every man sported patches on the back of their black shirts polished to a sheen by the chains.

"Do you understand it?" asked the woman next to me, in English.

I shook my head. "No." In all honesty it made me feel a little frightened.

"It's to show our love for the sacrifice of Imam Hossein. His sorrow is our sorrow, and his pain is our pain too."

She looked back to the procession. As the men moved closer I could see they weren't in any physical pain. The chains were as light as plastic. But their faces were filled with a sombre pride, and they smiled through tears as they walked past me.

"Oh! There's my husband!" the woman said now, and held up her phone, videoing as he walked past and gave a surreptitious wave to his wife.

Amongst the men I suddenly spotted Hossein himself, the fallen hero, in his green costume and armour, a green-plumed helmet on his head. But this Hossein carried a tank of water on his back, and sprayed a gentle mist over the performers and the

crowd to keep us cool. As the mist settled on my face I smelled the sweetness of rosewater. Its scent lingered gently in the air, like relief.

After the parade ended, the crowds dispersed and re-gathered in knots around black tents erected on the street outside each and every mosque. They were *Hosseinieh*, places where free food and drinks were served to the crowds. Hossein had died hungry and thirsty, and so in his memory he was now being offered all the food he could not have. To commit a massacre was a barbaric sin, but to deprive your victim of food and drink was considered unforgiveable in Iran. Ashura, as I was to discover over the coming days, was as much about cooking and eating as it was about mourning. Food was an act of generosity, a gift from those with more, to those with less. On every corner, stalls served silver trays of refreshing drinks—cold lemon *sharbat*, hot milo with milk, sweet spiced tea. On the street, men stirred enormous waist-high silver pots: saffron chicken with rice pilaf, *ghoresht* stew of lamb and chickpeas, or *ash*, the rich lemony soup with lentils and herbs that Azar's sister Mina had shown me how to cook. Every person I passed carried a plate piled with food. No wonder the atmosphere was unexpectedly festive, I thought.

“Each mosque feeds up to five thousand people a day, at every meal,” Azar told me later that night. “For each of the first ten days of Ashura, free of charge.”

“Who pays for it all?” I asked, incredulous.

“Benefactors. Successful businessmen like Hamid, the carpet seller in the bazaar.”

The benefactors hoped their good deeds would not go unnoticed on the day of final judgement.

The most important food of Ashura though, was *sholeh-zard*, a saffron and rosewater-scented rice pudding decorated with cinnamon, almonds and pistachios. It was mourning food, but also joyful, a special treat, sweet and comforting, made to share amongst friends. Like the families crowding the ice cream store, there was something about the way in which sweet foods could temper the bitterness of grief.

I thought long and hard that night at the real source of their mourning. It struck me that ta'zieh was just a front for the accumulated grief we all felt, all the time. Wives stricken by coronary artery disease, sons killed in motorbike accidents, fathers lost to dementia, broken hearts. Ta'zieh was a legitimate place to allow full

expression of grief for anything and anyone you had ever lost. For your lost chance to attend university. For your lack of bravery in pursuing the woman you really loved. For the miscarriage you suffered and the baby you would know. For the man who slept with your best friend and broke your heart twice over. As the crowds watched the tragedy of Hossein unfold they allowed themselves to be overtaken by their emotions, a permissible and very public outpouring of grief and sorrow. We needed this badly in the west, I thought. Grief was stifled, unacceptable, misplaced. We pushed it down, we broke it down into manageable stages, we frowned on the messy expression of raw grief.

Azar's older sister, Mina, sensing I hadn't yet learned a lot from Azar, had promised to visit that night and teach me how she made *sholeh-zard*. We were all there in the kitchen, Azar, Mina, her mother Mama-joon sitting in her wheelchair, me, stylish cousin Zoreh, visiting from Tehran. Azar and Zoreh provided translation. It was a happy communion of women and conversation in which I recognised only the food words, for orange blossom, pickles, beetroot and yoghurt. And saffron.

"Saffron is the most important ingredient, to colour it golden yellow," said Mina. Her hands once again were a joy to watch, expressive and elegant, quick and nimble where she was slow. She began with the rice, stirring it slowly in a heavy saucepan, with water and sugar. Once it was very soft and quite smooth she added the rosewater, and lastly the saffron.

"You must make sure you cook the rice in water until it's *really* soft and smooth," said Zoreh.

Everyone contributed in a grand melange of words and deeds. Each woman knowing instinctively what's next, what's overcooked, when to add something, giving advice and admonitions.

"For an extra kick you can add a pinch of cardamom, '*hel*'" said Zoreh.

"I like mine without," said Mina.

Once the gold colour of the saffron was dispersed evenly through the rice, Mina ladled it into small glass bowls to set.

"Decorate it however you would like," said Mina. "Traditional is pistachio and almond slivers, and a little bit of cinnamon powder. Not too much."

We finished the night eating Persian-style profiteroles, *noon khomei*, on the divan in the courtyard, dangling our legs over the edge like children. I could hear the mullah singing the evening prayers in the bazaar, but I felt I understood a little of the story, and the sadness. I took a *noon khomei* from the silver tray. The cool, sweet cream filling, scented with rosewater, was cold, held inside the thinnest pastry shell. Mama-joon scooped hers out with a long-handled teaspoon and ate it with relish. I wondered who she grieved—her long lost husband, Azar’s father? Her health and straight spine? Her unbroken hips? And Azar. Was she grieving her marriage, all but lost? She ate her profiterole in a single decisive bite, emitting satisfied sounds of pleasure as she did so, and in that moment I knew that with her zest for life she wouldn’t let grief derail her. What would I grieve for? I was lucky, I had escaped grief so far. Or had I? But I remembered all the children who had died of accidents and illnesses, children I had not been able to save. I remembered them all.

“Have some *sholeh-zard*,” said Mina, handing me a spoon and one of the glass bowls. She had decorated the *sholeh-zard* with a tree of life, its trunk made from cinnamon and its branches from almond and pistachio slivers. It was smooth and cool, just sweet enough, with the taste of saffron, rose and cinnamon, and the crunch of the nuts.

“So?” Mina asked, watching me as I savoured each mouthful.

“Perfect,” I said. Sweetness for grief.

Chapter Five

Night prayer Isha,

When the red thread of sunset disappears into the dark thread of night

Quran 2:187

Pigeons flew overhead, their wings fluttering. On the eleventh day of Ashura there was a perfect warmth and stillness in the air. For once there was silence, after days of prayers and parades, motorbikes whizzing to and from the bazaar in the lane outside the house. It was a public holiday and Azar's guests had all gone. We sat in the morning sunshine in the courtyard, drinking strong black Persian tea. Azar seemed more relaxed than I had seen her since I arrived.

"So now you've been here for what? Ten days? What do you think of Shiraz?" Azar asked me.

"Shiraz is incredible," I said. "You and your family have made me feel so at home, like I could come and go just like one of your family."

Azar nodded. "Shiraz has that energy." She gesticulated with her hands, sweeping them upwards. "When you go to the Hafez Mausoleum you really feel this strong energy, this...I mean, I don't know if it has to do with the garden, or the smell of all the flowers, but I know personally that each time I go there, the moment I put my foot and I look at all the cypress trees, and the stairs," she paused. "There's this *calmness* that enters in my body, then the tears come down." She looked up. Her mother was making her way down the stairs, painstakingly.

"Mama-joon! Good morning," she called to her mother, who gave a small wave and continued her slow progress.

"Shall I help her?" I asked for the eight or ninth time.

Azar shook her head. "Stay here. I wanna tell you about my mother's cooking. She taught me *everything*. She put so much love in her food. At the time, I never understood why would my mother get up at seven o'clock, and start cooking. I mean, every day we had a different food. Every day there was a new delight. But as you've witnessed, Persian cooking is very slow, so you really need to take your time, you cannot do short cuts otherwise the result is not good. You cannot hide the details."

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve noticed how carefully Mina and your other friends cook.”

“Exactly. It’s like Persian tea-making. You put the leaves, you put hot water and you put it on top of a kettle that has steam. And it prepares with the steam, and with time. And they say, tea making is like friendship. It takes time, and it has to be prepared slowly. And if you prepare a very nice tea that has good flavour, you know you don’t forget it.” She lifted her tea glass towards me.

Azar was right, friendship took time but was worth the correct preparation and attention to detail. I hoped that once I left Iran our friendship would continue to develop.

“I get the sense that cooking is extremely important in Iran,” I said.

“Fiona, in Iran, cooking is important. You know, we love food. When everybody in the family gathers together, sharing, and they’re laughing, and we’re a bit like French people – each time we’re sitting at the table – we’re talking about food. The *whole time* we’re talking about food.”

“Like last night,” I said. After the profiteroles and the *sholeh-zard* we had been joined by Zoreh’s and Mina’s husbands and all seven of us had eaten a simple meal of bread and feta and leftovers, talking the entire time about Persian food and the intricacies of its making.

“Yes. You can eat something very simple, as long as it’s in a peaceful environment, people around you are fun, it could be bread and feta cheese, or some cucumber. As long as you’re with friends and people you like, it becomes better. Because it’s not what you’re eating, it’s who you’re with and the whole atmosphere.”

“I know,” I said. “Food tastes better when you’re among friends.”

“Speaking of which, today we’re going to have lunch with my beautiful friend Nahid. She’s an *incredible* cook.”

Nahid Salomi seemed to have packed more life into her seventy-three years than ten men combined. Full-lipped and full-figured, she had the face and stature of a much younger woman. She met Azar and I at the door with an enormous smile and kisses on both cheeks. Her lips were impossibly large and glossy, as though she experienced everything in life mouth-first.

“Fiona, this is Nahid,” said Azar. “She’s an excellent cook, she’s a translator of English literature into Persian, she’s a lovely free soul.”

“That’s quite an introduction,” said Nahid, but I could tell she was pleased. “You must be Fiona.”

I nodded.

Azar interrupted. “She’s come all the way from Australia. Fourteen hours to Tehran and then the night train to Shiraz. Everybody is so delighted. Australia! To learn about Persian food.”

“Well, you’ll learn lots about it here. Zeba’s here too.”

Zeba came to the door and greeted me with a hug and more kisses.

“Come, let’s all go to the kitchen.”

Nahid’s kitchen was neat and functional, with long laminate benches and lots of cupboards. The only nod to decoration was a row of red and white ceramic pots next to the stove for salt, pepper, turmeric and cumin. Next to them sat a tiny brass mortar and pestle, for grinding saffron. I watched Nahid move confidently around her kitchen, mixing drinks for Azar and I in a large blue patterned bowl. She stirred the mixture and added finely grated cucumber, then poured it into glasses with a long handled ladle.

“This is a very refreshing summer drink,” said Nahid, handing me a tall glass of *sekanjebeen* mint syrup. “My children just love it.” It was the most delightful pale green, like the cool inside flesh of the cucumber, which is what it was mixed with. “I make this with sugar, white vinegar, and lots and lots and lots of fresh mint. Big bunches.”

The ice cubes clinked pleasantly as I stirred. The taste was pure summer, mint and cucumber, sweet and refreshing.

“Because of our Iranian climate, the hot conditions, we’ve been very creative in making different drinks,” said Zeba as we all sipped our mint syrup.

“Not everyone makes *sekanjebeen* as good as this.” She looked admiringly at Nahid, an accolade from one excellent cook to another.

“At the beginning of summer, when the mint is fresh and soft, that’s when you make the best *sekanjebeen*,” said Nahid.

I watched Nahid, her hands skilful, like an extra air of sensory organs they moved independently of her, peeling, chopping, touching, sensing. “We’re going to have quite a few dishes today, because I invited some more girlfriends, and my granddaughter and her friend. Firstly there’s the *khoresht khangar*, it’s a braise of wild artichokes with saffron and chicken. And *kashke bademjun*, that’s a smoked eggplant dish with mint and walnuts. The others we’ll make as we go along.”

A new friend arrived—Sue, Nahid’s downstairs neighbour.

“Sue is a really good cook,” said Nahid.

“Do you know anyone who is not a really good cook?” I asked the assembled women. Azar and Zeba were perched on kitchen stools, watching.

“We do have one friend. Her cooking is rubbish,” Zeba said, and they all laughed, seeming to know who was being discussed. “But her decoration of the dishes is beautiful.”

Decoration was supremely important, almost as important as taste, because like *gizek* in Kashgar, dishes had to seduce the eater first with the eyes, long before the mouth tasted. The visual appearance of food included consideration of the tablecloth, flowers, the serving dishes. In Nahid’s home there was a cut-glass bowl filled with plump pale green grapes, a crown of deep purple grapes in their centre, slender and tinged with pink at their stalks. A bowl of pears and crimson plums. Another of almonds and walnuts. A vase of fresh lillies.

“Each meal begins with a tray of small tastes—*mazze*—to delight the eyes and stimulate the appetite,” said Nahid, gently turning over the eggplants she was roasting in a heavy pan, now blackened and blistered. “Maybe fresh pistachio nuts, lemon-roasted almonds, *dolmeyeh* wrapped in vine leaves, flatbread with beetroot, mint and yoghurt dip, or *kashke bademjun*, like I’m making now.” The smokiness of the eggplants filled the room, and Nahid sliced them open and scooped out the soft flesh into a bowl.

“In Iran, the main meal is intended for sharing, each dish placed in the middle of the table.” There had to be both abundance and variety. “There might be a chicken stuffed with raisins and plums, *morgh shekampur*, a braise of lamb with chickpeas and Persian lime, *ab gousht*, or *cotelette*, tender patties of beef and potato

served with pickled vegetables.” Persian limes, small and sweet, flavoured many savoury dishes. Strongly-flavoured vegetable pickles, *torshi*, accompanied every meal, along with the fresh, clean taste of vibrant fresh herbs, *sabzi*.

“How about rice?” I asked.

“Rice is a vital part of every meal, and saffron rice pilafs, *polo*, are served plain or mixed through with herbs, or broad beans. Everyone’s favourite bit is the *tahdeeg*, the crunchy rice crust from the pan bottom, broken into pieces and shared around.”

The travellers I met in Iran over the previous two weeks surprised me by complaining bitterly about the food. “It’s all the same!” they said. “Kebabs. Kebabs. Kebabs.” Now, to be fair, kebabs in Iran were a standard dish in roadside restaurants. Succulent beef, saffron chicken or tender lamb, threaded on long skewers and chargrilled, they were served with a variety of accompaniments that provided contrasts in texture and flavour—crisp pickled vegetables, soft blistered tomatoes, smoky chargrilled peppers, and buttery saffron rice. Hardly dull. But I could see their point - eating the same dish every day might become tedious. To experience the best Persian food, one had to eat a meal in a Persian home, where home cooks like Nahid made marvellous food every single day. I felt incredibly lucky to be on the receiving end of such generous hospitality.

“A meal always ends with something sweet,” Nahid continued in her summary of a typical Persian feast. “It might be *chay*, strong black tea in a small glass, sweetened by holding a cube of sugar between your teeth. Or it might be different sweets, like *halva-e kasih*, a rosewater-scented saffron rice sweet, or *noon khomei*, choux pastry puffs, I think you ate those last night Azar told me.”

“Now we taste the *khoresht*.” Nahid took two spoons and handed one to me. As she tasted she closed her eyes so she could concentrate on the taste. The wild artichokes had a taste similar but more intense than cultivated ones, but a much softer texture. The whole dish was flavoured too with saffron and the richness of chicken on the bone.

“Nahid tastes like it’s the last day of her life,” Azar whispered to me. “She must have an *incredible* sexual appetite.”

Nahid overheard and laughed a full throaty laugh, giving Azar a knowing glance. “My husband died of a heart attack. What are you suggesting?”

“Can you imagine? Her appetites?” Azar continued. By now Zeba and Sue were laughing too and I couldn’t help but join in.

I watched Nahid finish the *kashke bademjun*, adding the sour yoghurt to the pureed smoky eggplant, and spooning it into a shallow dish. She decorated the top with a complex pattern of crushed walnuts, dried mint, and crispy fried onion slivers.

“Okay, so, going back to the food, which is our lovely subject, I think personally that food and art are two elements in the world that connects people,” said Azar, becoming serious again. “I’m very disappointed with what humans are capable of doing. I think we’re at a point in the world where we need peace, we need a way of making this angry world come down. When you sit down and eat it’s a peaceful time. There’s no wars.”

We all nodded, watching as Nahid and Sue pout the finishing touches to the other dishes, a mushroom and onion braise made rich at the end with the addition of beaten egg, a platter of fresh herbs, a selection of pickles, and a saffron *polo* topped with a knob of melting butter.

The table was a picture of elegance with silverware and best china on the embroidered cream tablecloth. We took our places. There were ten of us altogether, with Sue’s husband the only man bravely sitting among three generations of women—Nahid, her daughter-in-law, her grand-daughter, Azar, and Zeba, myself and several other friends. The younger women had arrived wearing manteaux and head scarves, proper *hijab*, but also brought a bag containing their regular clothes—skinny jeans, heels, sleeveless tops and fitted dresses. They were blond, brunette, all stylishly well-groomed.

Nahid changed too, out of her apron and into a patterned black and white dress that showed off her ample curves. “Let’s begin,” she said.

I sampled a little of everything she had cooked, slowly considering every bite. The *kashke bademjun* was smooth and smoky, balanced by the tartness of the yoghurt and the intensity of the Persian mint. It was incredible.

Around the table words, stories, laughter, the sharing of food connected us all.

“What’s your attitude to cooking Azar?” Nahid asked.

“Cooking is not only cooking. For me it’s meditation. Anytime that I’m not well or if something bothers me, I cook *five* dishes.” Everyone laughed. “Because then instead of being upset or using my energy in a negative sense, I use it in a positive sense and I don’t think about things that bother me.”

“I agree,” said Nahid, and Zeba and I nodded our agreement. Cooking was my solace, my nourishment, my meditation. When my hands were busy my mind calmed itself and my problems less pressing.

At the end of the meal we sipped and tasted little sweets and drank small glasses of tea, served with paper-thin circles of crisp toffee for sweetness. There were also fresh dates mashed together with tahini and crushed walnuts, like candied honey with the smooth nuttiness of the tahini. There were quinces in syrup, fresh grapes and candied grapefruit peel.

“Fiona you must try the *moraba bahar narenj*,” said Nahid, passing me a small dish with a clear pale orange-pink jelly with translucent petals.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s orange blossom jam. They say when you taste it, it’s like paradise,” said Nahid. Everyone at the table murmured their agreement as I took a small mouthful. “It’s made with freshly-fallen Seville orange blossoms.”

“I put a sheet under the tree to gather them,” said Zeba.

“Yes, exactly, they must be freshly-fallen. You soak them in cold water overnight for the flavour to develop and then the next day add cold sugar syrup.”

“It must be cold,” Zeba added.

“Yes, and increase the temperature ever so gently so the petals don’t brown.”

I was speechless. It was an intensely scented but delicately flavoured syrup with the translucent blossoms soft and tender. I had never tasted anything so heavenly.

“Good, right?” said Nahid.

“You have all shown me the most incredible hospitality here,” I said. “Especially you Nahid, and you Azar.” I looked over at them and smiled. “Thank you all so much.”

“No matter where you go in the world,” Azar said, “even if you don’t speak their language, prepare something to share. It’s just like pure generosity. It’s not how much you have, it’s how much you share. That, for me, is hospitality.”

I left Shiraz in the late afternoon, as the hills outside the city were turning a soft red. I had wished Azar farewell, having learned more about her in the past twenty-four hours than in the previous two weeks. I hoped we would remain friends and I would see her again somewhere in the world. I was in an all-female compartment, Car Four. There was always that moment where I wondered if my companions would be pleasant, or smell, fart, throw food scraps on the floor or talk too much. Compartment Four was none of that. My compartment companions were sisters, Mina, a twenty-four-year-old beauty therapist, and her older sister Marjan, an engineer, who spoke perfect English and acted as our go-between. They reminded me, with their banter and laughter, of Bella and Lily ten years from now. As we left Shiraz station behind they bombarded me with questions. How was life abroad? How about my children? What was my work? What did I think of Iran? And lastly, was I married and if so, what was my husband like?

What was my husband like? Images of Matt floated into my head. How would I describe him to complete strangers? Kind, gentle, distant. The three of us kept talking and I tried not to think about coming home. I wanted to remain immersed in this world I had entered a while longer. We passed the Zagros Mountains, vast rocky outcrops lying north to south along Iran's border with Iraq. As the desert sun began to set, the mountains turned red, then violet and indigo. And we kept talking through our dinner of saffron chicken with tart barberries and rice served in the train’s plush dining car.

After dinner, returning to our compartment to find a tray of light snacks, we nibbled on Asraneh cake and drank tea.

“Read my tealeaves?” asked Mina. She had a full, curvaceous figure, enormous brown eyes and lips painted dark pink, and she laughed easily and often. I sensed a naughtiness to her, a refreshing irreverence. Through dinner she had kept us entertained with funny stories about life as an Iranian beautician. Women might wear headscarves and modest dress, but they had no less interest in beauty than women elsewhere in the world. She looked at me expectantly, passing the cup in her hands to me.

“What do you see?” she asked.

“You know I’m not a tea-leaf reader. I’m a doctor.” I peered into the cup.

“I know,” said Mina. “But go ahead.”

I struggled to make out anything vaguely recognizable in the dregs. “Er...I see a...cat.”

Mina looked at me blankly as Marjan translated. “A cat? What does it mean?”

I wondered whether there were cross-cultural differences in the way a dark cat might be interpreted.

“It’s good luck,” I assured her. “Really good luck.”

She smiled. “What else can you see?”

The more I stared, images in the tealeaves began to come alive. “Hmmm...a small child. On a swing.”

“My child?”

“I don’t know,” I stalled.

“Can you see anything about Mina’s husband?” asked Marjan. “She’s very desperate to know what he looks like, when she’ll meet him, and whether he’ll be rich.” Mina collapsed in fits of giggles.

But as hard as I looked I couldn’t see a man. There was a house, and a giraffe in addition to the cat and the child on the swing. I turned the teacup around and around in my hands, this way and that, as Mina and Marjan laughed at my efforts. In desperation, I turned the cup upside down. A few drops of tea splashed onto my lap.

“Wait! I see him!” I said. There was definitely the face of a man in profile, with a pointed chin, a beard, and receding hair.

Mina’s big brown eyes looked at me, and she shuffled further forward on her seat. “How does he look?”

“He looks...not typically handsome.” Her face fell. “But you know, handsome men can be bad news.” Marjan nodded vigorously. Perhaps she’d had a bad experience with a handsome man. “He looks a little older. Maybe that means he’s already rich.”

Her face brightened. “Okay, I don’t care so much about his looks I suppose. But the question is, when will I *meet* him?”

But at that moment the conductor knocked on the door of our compartment to check our tickets. I set the cup down as we scrambled for our headscarves.

“Come in,” said Marjan, adjusting hers, stifling a giggle and handing him our tickets. As she did so, her elbow bumped the little table between our seats, and the cup filled with Mina’s future rolled off onto the floor.

The conductor leaned down to pick it up. “Let me take that for you,” he said. Mina opened her mouth but no words came out.

“There goes your husband,” said Marjan.

And then we couldn’t hold the laughs in any longer.

It occurred to me only afterwards, as I lay in my bunk fighting sleep, that all the women I had met in Iran had one important thing in common. They were the main actors in their own lives. Their husbands and sons and lovers, if they had them, played a supporting role, on the fringes. It wasn’t at all what I had expected to find here, but perhaps that was the point. Perhaps this visit to Iran had not been about cooking at all, although I had certainly learned a lot about Persian food and its wonders. Perhaps I had been here to discover the strength of women alone, their strength in adversity. I thought about Zeba, doing whatever it took to spirit her son away from Iran to have surgery, when a husband who could perform the surgery was right there. And I thought about Azar, her strong independent spirit and relentless energy, but relentless love too.

Time came for the night prayer, Isha, when the red thread of sunset disappears into the black thread of night. I pulled myself up onto my elbows and leaned towards the window, my forehead resting on the cold glass. It was time to go home.

Mina's Sholeh-zard

Serves 4

Sholeh-zard is made with love and tears. It sweetens the sharp pain of grief and soothes a breaking heart. Think about this as you cook. Rose water and saffron are the most important ingredients in this dish. Be sure to buy the best of both that you can. Iran's finest rose water comes from outside the city of Kashan, so any rose water labelled Kashan will be excellent. It is made with the petals of the red rose known as the Tears of Mohammed. Saffron is grown in two main places in Iran - outside the holy city of Mashad in the country's north-east, and near Estebahn in the south, a few hours from Shiraz. The saffron from Mashad is excellent, but Mina believes the Estebhan saffron has a more intense scent and its threads appear redder because they don't include the base or root of the pistil as in Mashad (where it looks red and yellow). That's why the saffron from Estebhan actually fetches the highest price.

Ingredients

1 cup of Basmati or Persian Rice
water
7 dessertspoons of white sugar
2 tablespoons of ghee
3 tablespoons of rose water
A pinch of saffron
Cinnamon
Slivered almonds
Slivered pistachios

Soak the rice for several hours in cold water. One cup is enough. Now add it to a heavy saucepan with several cups of hot water and boil until the rice is very soft. You might need to add a little more hot water along the way. Stir it often., and maybe add a little more water as it starts sticking. When the rice turns soft, add at least a dessert spoon of sugar to start with. You will need more but you are going to add it later. Turn down the heat to very low. Now add two big spoonfuls of ghee and

stir it in. Add the rest of the sugar, six dessert spoons, and three tablespoons of rosewater. Add one tablespoon of slivered almonds and keep stirring, keep stirring. It has to be really smooth. At this point it smells divine. Keep cooking it over a low heat, stirring all the while. You will know the rice is ready once you can make a line in the rice with your spoon and it stays there. Now take your pinch of saffron and grind it into a powder with a brass saffron grinder or small mortar and pestle. Put the saffron powder in a small cup and add a tablespoon of hot water. Stir it until the saffron dissolves and imparts a deep amber colour to the water and a strong earthy floral scent is released. Now add it to the rice and stir well to distribute the colour.

Spoon the sholeh-zard into several small shallow serving dishes, or one larger one. Leave it to cool and set. Once cooled, make a beautiful pattern on the surface using the pistachio nibs, slivered almonds and a little cinnamon. Eat it warm or chilled, depending on the weather and the time of year and your preference, with a dainty spoon.

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