

CITY OF LIES

Love, Sex, Death and the
Search for Truth in Tehran

RAMITA NAVAI

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
London

First published in Great Britain in 2014
by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (hardback): 978 0 297 86949 8

ISBN (trade paperback): 9 780 297 87131 6

Typeset by GroupFMG within BookCloud

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

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Weidenfeld & Nicolson
The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House
5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London, WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

www.orionbooks.co.uk

PREFACE

Let's get one thing straight: in order to live in Tehran you have to lie. Morals don't come into it: lying in Tehran is about survival. This need to dissimulate is surprisingly egalitarian – there are no class boundaries and there is no religious discrimination when it comes to the world of deceit. Some of the most pious, righteous Tehranis are the most gifted and cunning in the art of deception. We Tehranis are masters at manipulating the truth. Tiny children are instructed to deny that daddy has any booze at home; teenagers passionately vow their virginity; shopkeepers allow customers to surreptitiously eat, drink and smoke in their back rooms during the fasting months and young men self-flagellate at the religious festival of Ashura, purporting that each lash is for Imam Hossein, when really it is a macho show to entice pretty girls, who in turn claim they are there only for God. All these lies breed new lies, mushrooming in every crack in society.

The truth has become a secret, a rare and dangerous commodity, highly prized and to be handled with great care. When the truth is shared in Tehran, it is an act of extreme trust or absolute desperation. Lying for survival in Iranian culture goes back a long way; in the early years of the Islamic conquest, Shias were encouraged to lie about their faith to avoid persecution, a practice known as *taqiya*. The Koran also states that, in some cases, lying for the greater good is permitted. While this pathology of

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subterfuge has leaked out of the city and flowed into the towns and villages across the country, Tehran remains at its source.

But here is the rub: Iranians are obsessed with being true to themselves; it is part of our culture. The Persian poet Hafez begs us to seek the truth to discover the meaning of life:

*This love you now have of the Truth
Will never forsake you
Your joys and sufferings on this arduous path
Are lifting your worn veil like a rising stage curtain
And will surely reveal your Magnificent Self*

The characters in Iranian soap operas are nearly always on a quest to find their real selves and many a fatwa deals with the dichotomy between the burden of religious obligations and honest human desires. So most Tehranis are in constant conflict, for how do you stay true to yourself in a system in which you are forced to lie to ensure survival?

Let me be clear about one last thing. I am not saying that we Iranians are congenital liars. The lies are, above all, a consequence of surviving in an oppressive regime, of being ruled by a government that believes it should be able to interfere in even the most intimate affairs of its citizens.

While living (and lying) in Tehran I heard the stories of the Tehranis you are about to meet. Not all of them are ordinary Tehranis; some exist at the very margins of Iranian society. But I hope that even the most extreme stories in this book will help an outsider understand everyday life in this city of over twelve million people. In my experience, the defining trait of Tehranis is their kindness, for no matter how hard life gets, no matter how tight the regime turns the screw, there is an irrepressible

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warmth; I have felt it from diehard regime supporters to ardent dissidents and everyone in between.

I have changed all names and some details, time frames and locations to protect people, but everything here has happened or is still happening. These are all true stories from the city of lies.

EIGHT
FARIDEH

Fereshteh Street, north Tehran

No matter how hard she tried, she could not get it right – gyrating her hips while undulating her stomach. Farideh looked like she was frantically trying to keep an invisible hula hoop aloft. All the women were laughing at their own clumsiness.

Belly dancing at the health club had proved even more popular than the Bikram yoga classes. The dance studio had magnificent views of the mountains, but thick lace curtains had been drawn to shield the dancing ladies from view. The owner took every precaution to abide by the law.

It was then, mid hip-swivel, that four chador-clad women from the morality police entered the gym. They walked into reception and calmly told the duty manager to shut the whole place down. They then went upstairs into the dance class and one of them turned the Arabic pop music off. None of them shouted. They just issued a list of commands: *stop dancing; everybody get dressed; everybody get outside*. The teacher, a blonde dancer in bra top and hot pants, was terrified.

‘I don’t understand what we’ve done wrong?’ She was pleading with one of the *chadoris*, who was shoving all her music CDs into a bag.

‘These dancing classes are lewd, provocative, immoral and

contrary to Islam,' the *chadori* replied in a clipped monotone. Most of the women had already grabbed their *manteaus* and headscarves and raced outside, scared of being arrested.

Farideh was enraged; her weekly moment of joy had been invaded by *them*. She refused to be hurried.

'How dare you! You should be ashamed! When did dancing become illegal in your filthy minds? Even if there were men here, they would hardly be interested in us when there are so many young girls on the loose that *your* lot can't control.'

'But look, no men! *Mard neest!*' A beautiful French business consultant was trying to reason with the *chadoris* in her faltering Persian. The *chadoris* paid no attention to the foreigner. They had recognized the supercilious tone of Farideh's voice; it irked them that the Islamic Revolution had not managed to curb the superiority complexes of these rich old women. Farideh recognized it too, and she was always struck by her condescending manner towards *regimeys*. She could not help but look down on them, her anger at what the country had become manifesting itself as class hate.

'You—' Another *chadori* was pointing at Farideh now. 'Watch your tongue or I'll have you arrested. Unfortunately, old women like you still have libidos, and we know what happens when *your sort* can't get attention. This type of dancing clearly promotes lesbianism. It's disgusting the way you all behave,' she said.

Farideh must have looked shocked, for when she walked outside the other women grouped around her.

'We heard you shouting at them! What did they say?'

'They're afraid we'll turn into lesbians.' Some of the women began to laugh at the absurdity of it; Farideh just stood in silence. She was angry at herself for letting something so trivial upset her; it was not as though she would never dance again,

but the dance classes were one of the few things she actually looked forward to leaving her house for.

Farideh dreaded her brushes with the city. Despite all the years, it was impossible not to feel stabs of longing when she drove through the streets for the Tehran she had loved, full of miniskirts, discos and pool halls; juice bars and vodka bars, donkey carts and new cars; the triumph of colours and music on the streets; the thrill and buzz of a new epoch; milkshakes and cigarettes and wine and song. She remembered one of her boyfriends coming back from a trip to London and announcing how the English were so *uptight*. How London was so *backward*. He told her British border police had never seen a watermelon, and insisted on slicing it open in case he was smuggling something inside it. He told her the food was terrible, you could not even buy garlic! And he had been threatened with arrest for indecent exposure because he had taken his top off on a scorching day. How they had laughed at swinging London.

There were plenty of her friends who were now happy to live in the bubble of north Tehran, acting as though the rest of the city did not exist. Farideh did not have that luxury. Ever since her husband Kaveh had died she had taken over his fight to claw back some of the family land that had been confiscated after the revolution. Kaveh had come from old money – lots of it – but a large portion was tied up in property and land, and most of that had been seized by the state.

For nearly twenty years Farideh had endured endless days in government offices, ministries and courts, forced to beg and flatter and fawn to various officials and judges who spoke to her as though she barely existed. Sometimes the first question they would ask was: ‘And where’s your husband?’ Even when she explained that he had died, that she was now in charge, they did

not take her seriously. She saw how differently they would treat the men. The process was torturously slow; the machinery of the Islamic Republic was encumbered by bribery, corruption, poorly educated officials, internal politics and crippling ineptitude. It took her five years to prove that the deeds to a building her father had owned had been forged by a civil servant who had claimed it as his own. And then, after spending over 50,000 US dollars on bribes, it took another two years to fight the (rich) civil servant's appeals, which were effectively greased by his even larger bribes to the judges. She spent six years trying to reclaim a plot of land north of the city where Kaveh's family once had a holiday home. After the revolution, it had been declared the property of the state. She had received five separate verdicts from five different courts, all in her favour. Yet still the verdicts continued to be contested, which meant another court case; another appeal; another few years.

Farideh often wondered if she should have left after the revolution. Her life had only just started to come together when it happened. She had finished her degree in art history and had been accepted for a job as curator of a small gallery. Kaveh had got his first promotion in the Oil Ministry and they were attending decadent parties at weekends. She had watched as so many of her friends fled, draining their prodigious bank accounts and siphoning the money into Switzerland; politicians and cohorts of the Shah plundered the treasury and the Ministries for every last shekel, frantically bankrupting the country in a whirl of greed, fear and violence, sucking the bone of its marrow. Whole packs of aristocrats and monarchists escaped in private planes and first-class seats, bound for their villas in the south of France, their *pieds-à-terre* in Paris, London and New York. And of course they flocked to the blue-skied glitz of Los Angeles, where Italian

mottled marble, crystal chandeliers and gilded furniture would be soothing reminders of home. In time they monopolized block after block of Brentwood and Westwood, until Los Angeles became their *Tehrangelles*.

There were those who refused to be cowed, who refused to leave their glorious land, even in the face of death. Most of them were executed. Like General Rahimi, who was killed by firing squad on the rooftop of a school a few minutes before midnight on 14 February 1979. The General was the military commander and police chief of Tehran; he had also been a family friend of Farideh. She had watched his interrogation by the Islamists on television. They had beaten and tortured him, yet he refused to denounce the Shah. His last words, reportedly, were '*Javid Shah*', long live the Shah. But the Shah had already scarpered; the only battle he was now fighting was against the cancer that would soon kill him. Farideh still ached when she thought of those times and the friends she had lost.

She had chosen to stay. Kaveh had tried to persuade her to flee, but she could not bear the thought of leaving her parents behind, who were too set in their ways to start over. That was only one of the reasons. They had not been as canny as their friends; there were no secret offshore accounts. No homes abroad. No foreign passports. Farideh was afraid that if they left, their house would be taken. When the new state began to auction off thousands of people's homes, she thought she had made the right decision. They still had enough to afford a handsome life, better than anything abroad. Then there was the war. A new round of friends leaving, of parents packing their sons off to international boarding schools instead of the front line. The ones who stayed behind, like Farideh, retreated to the countryside when the bombings in Tehran started.

During the darkest days, they had partied the hardest despite the dangers, drinking and dancing and loving like they never had before. These moments, in between the terrors, were a perversely magical time.

Farideh had also stayed partly through loyalty and devotion to this cursed, wretched, beautiful land. These were her people, fanatical or not. She was a patriotic woman and talk of Cyrus the Great could still reduce her to tears; as for so many Iranians, it was not just the romanticism of him as a great, beneficent king, it was the fact that at the time of his rule Persia had been the envy of the world. She would suffer with her fellow countrymen. Although so many of them appeared happier now the Shah was gone. The extent of discontent had taken them all by surprise. She felt guilty for not having noticed. It was easy enough to call these others a bunch of *dahati*, illiterate peasants, but deep down it upset her that there was such a giant gulf between her and so many of her people, and she sensed they would edge no nearer to each other in her lifetime.

Some days she was sure she had made the right decision. She remembered her friends who had suffered far more, like Mr Karimi, an eminent chemical engineer reduced to being a London cab driver, and Mr and Mrs Ahmadian – he had been a high-ranking member of government under the Shah and spent his final years in a small two-up, two-down terraced house in Willesden, robbed of all his wealth, all his land taken. They were the honest ones. The ones who did not loot the country, but left with nothing, taking their naive, law-abiding ways with them, to stand in queues and beg for acceptance that would be issued on pieces of paper; to become refugees and immigrants; exiles.

The night after the gym was raided, Farideh was meant to be going to a wedding, but she was no longer in the mood. Besides, these big, showy weddings bored her.

The son of the head of a multinational company with a government contract was marrying an English model and the party was happening a few roads away from where Farideh lived. The father of the groom had pulled all the right strings and sweetened all the right mouths. The local police had been paid off. The party was going to be spectacular. They had hired top DJs, a band and a film crew to cover the event. The cost was rumoured to be a million US dollars. Hundreds of guests in expensive clothes were screened by security and were ordered to hand in their mobile phones before entering the gigantic luxury home. The north Tehranis were out in force, the spoilt layabouts, party lovers and hangers-on. The groom's mother was a *chadori*, and some of the partying would be carefully hidden from her. This was new Tehran, where tradition and class are blended together and trumped by money. Some of the upper-crust families kept away from these events, wanting to distance themselves from distasteful displays of wealth.

It was a huge operation. But by nine o'clock it was all over. The party had barely started when it was raided by the security forces. Terrified revellers scattered like rabbits, hiding anywhere they could. *Basijis* on motorbikes circled, looking for victims. A few truckloads were carted off and the father of the groom was led away in handcuffs. Everyone had their theory: somebody important had a grudge; his competition wanted his contract and this was the way to get it; he was a pawn in a political game.

When Farideh heard about the wedding raid, she did not leave the house for twelve days straight. She painted, tended to the garden and had friends round. But being at home was as lonely as being

on the streets. And she was aware that she had to face her fears, get out there and carry on. She broke her enforced incarceration by agreeing to join her friend Lilly at an art class. Lilly had discovered a remarkable young artist, Golnar, who gave life-drawing lessons.

Farideh and the other women were drinking tea and smoking when Golnar arrived. She was alone, without her life model. It was obvious something was wrong.

‘They raided a friend’s lesson, I don’t know how they found out. Dena was modelling.’ Golnar started crying. ‘They arrested everyone. They accused them of making porn, and when they didn’t find any footage, they said it must have been an orgy. I didn’t want to say what had happened on the phone.’ Golnar explained that they had been on the thirteenth floor of an apartment block, a solitary building away from prying eyes, with wondrous light streaming in from huge windows. They had not seen a faraway neighbour spying with binoculars. It did not matter that everyone, apart from the model, had been fully clothed. The drawings, of course, made matters worse. They were propagating porn – an executionable offence.

‘Where’s Dena now?’ Lilly asked.

‘She’s at her mother’s, but they’re trying to get her out.’

‘How much will it cost?’

‘About 10,000 US dollars across the Turkish border. Her parents have given her 4,000, all they’ve got.’

‘Tell her it’s OK, I’ll pay the rest,’ said Lilly.

Farideh stepped in. ‘I’ll help you Lilly, I’ll give you half.’

Farideh had helped a few journalists and activists in the past, paying for their lawyers. It made her feel less useless. There were plenty of privileged women who could not care less, as long as they were safe and free and nothing threatened their splendid lives; and there were those who were too frightened to get involved.

She had tried everything to fight the increasing isolation. Yoga had helped, the breathing exercises calmed her and made her feel a little more whole, even if it was only for a matter of minutes. She had tried the Vipassana meditation retreat outside Tehran, where she took a vow of silence. It was full of lapsed drug addicts who had nowhere else to turn. She had emerged after ten days more accepting of herself and the world, exhilarated with new concepts like *mindfulness*, able to will the bad thoughts away. That did not last. A stay in an ashram in Goa had left her more empty than before, depressed that a country such as India had progressed so much while her own slipped backwards. Depressed that she had resorted to searching the globe for what she should be finding at home. By the time she decided to sign up for the Landmark Forum courses in personal development, another underground hit in Tehran, it had closed down.

She had even dared to try Christianity, more out of curiosity than a need to find God. A friend, a recent Christian convert, had convinced her to give Jesus a go. They went to a weekly night service, walking round the block three times, checking over their shoulders before entering an alley. They used a password to get in: *omeed*, hope. They walked through a large garden to a soundproofed room at the back of a house. The music was deafening: frantic, joyous singing; manic clapping and whooping to the clatter of a tuneless piano and rattle of tambourines. There were crosses hanging from the walls and teenagers jumping around like kangaroos. Nearly everyone here was a convert, risking death to pray to the same God, but a new prophet. Farideh was grief-stricken; she could not articulate exactly why she was so sad watching the fearless happiness and love around her; she had not seen people look this happy for a long time. She had later found out that the underground church

was funded by a Christian union affiliated to a North American university, its money spent on proselytizing in Muslim nations. She was furious, suddenly so protective of the faith that she felt imprisoned by.

And yet Farideh had never felt so far from her religion. She believed in God. She loved the drama and humanity of Shia sacrifice, of battling for your beliefs. She did not hate all mullahs; in fact there were some she adored, with their wise words and modest behaviour. She had continued to seek spiritual guidance through her *estekhareh* sessions with a mullah who lived nearby. He had a good heart and he always got everything right, which was more than a coincidence. She was surprised by the strength of her superstition.

Over lunch with a Zoroastrian community leader, a charismatic charmer and intellectual with a ribald sense of humour who delighted women wherever he went, Farideh confided in him of her evangelical foray. He told her every month he turned away dozens of young kids wanting to convert to Zoroastrianism. The kids would plead with him, saying it was their true faith, part of Iran's glory years before the Arabs invaded and burned their books and gave them Allah.

'But why do you turn them away?' Farideh looked almost bereft.

'Apart from the fact I don't want to get anyone killed, it's all the bloody same isn't it? And they've got this romantic notion about Zoroastrianism. They think it'll fix all their problems, but it won't.' The Zoroastrian was murdered in an apartment in Paris a year later, his throat slashed by his ex-wife's lover. Some said the killer was an Iranian undercover agent. The authorities had been monitoring him for years. He had even been kidnapped in London, on his way to give a lecture at the School of Oriental

and African Studies. Iranian intelligence agents from *ettela'at* had driven him around for three hours and threatened him, he had said. They should have known he was not the type of man to be intimidated. He had returned to Tehran with the same vitality as before, even more determined to help his Zoroastrian community.

A month after the arrests of the life drawing class, again Farideh felt unable to leave the house. Some of her friends thought her weak for letting *them* get the better of her, that it was just bad luck she had been caught in a freak wave of crackdowns that happened from time to time. Lilly persuaded her to go to a friend's dinner party.

Farideh flitted between a few different social groups. The handful of upper-crust, old-money families mostly stuck together. They were descendants of the Qajars, a Turkic dynasty who ruled Persia from the late 1700s to the 1920s. Being a Qajar was to be bandied about and made known, for it was a thing of stature and prestige; never mind that the Qajar rulers were oppressive, whoring gamblers who clung onto power and gobbled up the country's wealth while their subjects were devastated by famine. Blue blood was blue blood. A step down from them were the landowners, to which Farideh belonged. They had enjoyed being on the winning side of feudalism until land redistribution in the early 1960s, but even that did not seem to dent their wealth. There were the families of established merchants who had been trading across the Caucasus and along the silk routes for generations, selling to the royals and upper classes and spending money on education until they were, at last, assimilated into them. There were the academics and intellectuals, but they were rare, Iran being the victim of one of the world's most spectacular brain drains. Money was not strictly an indicator of class; there were

enough struggling aristos to attest to that. In Farideh's generation, the new wave of industrialists was seen as uncouth, no matter how much money they made. Too *nouveau*. Artists, film-makers, actors, foreign visitors and diplomats dipped in and out of these circles, along with avant-garde bohemians and (educated) free spirits. Their homes were mostly clustered together in a few choice north Tehran neighbourhoods that curled around the foothills of the mountains: Niavaran, Farmanieh, Fereshteh; the Chelseas, Knightsbridges and Mayfairs of Tehran. A few of the edgier, younger generation had moved downtown, to be nearer to the soul of the city, among the hoi polloi where Tehran still had heart and vigour.

Farideh lived in Fereshteh, the first right turn off Vali Asr above Parkway, the final northern stretch of the big road. A quarter of the way down Fereshteh Street, opposite Bosni Herzogovin Street, is the luxury Sam Center, stuffed with shops like Chopard and TAG Heuer.

Farideh's home was a grand mansion with inner and outer courtyards, one of the few old houses still stubbornly standing in the area, squashed in on all sides by hideous high-rises. The house was exquisite; Farideh had an eye for design and style, cleverly mixing the old and the new. There were gigantic turquoise urns and ancient clay bowls on stone floors, priceless Persian carpets and antique tiles. On the walls hung paintings by the latest up-and-coming artists and in the garden there was a swimming pool surrounded by walnut and fig trees. She had lived here since her marriage, for over thirty years. It was where Kaveh had died, in their bed, after cancer dealt him three cruel years of pain. She had married Kaveh for love and for his goodness. He had been her best friend, a true, loyal companion in life.

Tonight's party was at a theatre producer's house in Niavaran,

north-east of where she lived. The parties and gatherings kept them all going. It was part of their defence; it was what lent verisimilitude to their carefully crafted lives, as well as being the only possible means they could socialize, laugh and dance like the rest. But the community was small, even if the houses were big.

They were served canapés and wine in the garden in the last glinting shafts of the day's sunlight, enjoying the dewy smell of the cool air and the sensation of a new season lurking nearby. A few nightingales tentatively tested their voices; Farideh could smell a joint being passed around.

It was a mixed lot tonight. There were a few single girls in their thirties; one was an architect, another a poet and the rest worked in publishing. An international painter was chatting to a respected movie director. An eligible doctor in his forties was encircled by another group of single women. A gastroenterologist by profession, he was a secret stitcher of hymens on the side, restoring dignity and marriage prospects with a needle and a few inches of thread. His few friends who knew his secret had nicknamed him Dr Sew-up. He gave back virginity to the daughters of rich *bazaaris* and industrialists; to girls from religious families and *sonati* families rich and poor, even ordinary working-class girls. Having your hymen sewn up could cost from 200,000 tomans (about sixty US dollars) to seven million tomans (about 2,300 dollars) depending on who and where in the city your doctor was, but Dr Sew-up charged lower fees to his poorer clients as he had a strong sense of justice; it was not fair that these fearful women were being judged simply because they had been born into the wrong class. His own class had different rules. Western rules. He knew there were plenty of rich kids who wanted virgins, but they were never the true upper classes. He and his friends wanted the opposite: experienced women who would

not simply lie back and give out in the hope of getting a ring on their finger. Dr Sew-up was regaling the women with stories of virginity kits that he had seen in the bazaar, consisting of a capsule filled with red liquid that was to be inserted into the vagina and would burst under pressure. Dr Sew-up was lying; he had not seen them in the bazaar, but had heard about them from one of his clients who had decided the fake blood was an unconvincingly bright hue.

At the dinner table, talk shifted from scandal to art, to politics and to work, the familiar rhythm of the subjects ticking along with the regularity of a metronome. A European businessman had left his wife and four children for a woman they all knew, a forty-something desperate high-class wannabe with a series of failed relationships scattered behind her. Copious injections of Botox had failed to dissolve her haughty look, a mouth permanently turned in disgust that she had learnt from her mother and practised since her teenage years in the hope it would elevate her status if her face suggested everything around her was beneath her. She taught French to rich kids and diplomats' children, and even spoke Persian with a faint, affected *Parisienne* accent. She had slept her way through a slew of married men, aiming for the ones with foreign passports, for that translated into *cachet*. She had finally struck gold.

There were a few new faces, part-time exiles dropping in from Milan and New York to buy art, socialize, speak their mother tongue and eat good food. There had been a flood of returnees in recent years, mostly the children of the Diaspora coming back with their sweet foreign accents and malapropisms that would endear them to the rest. They came to find themselves; to find husbands and wives, to party, to be sharks in a very small pool, which they were; for everyone was hungry to be touched by the

West with all its exotic chic and refined urbanity. Once these visiting exiles had tasted the upper echelons of society, a tier they did not inhabit in their host countries, many did not want to return to the West. They simply cocooned themselves from the real Islamic Republic. Just as Farideh and her friends had done.

‘So what’s the latest from New York?’

‘Dull! New York is just about visual arts at the moment. So boring. It *so* doesn’t excite me. It’s just not happening there,’ replied a striking woman who dabbled in interior design, as did most of these females, spending their friends’ money on exorbitant furniture and overrated paintings. ‘Everything’s becoming the same. I blame the bourgeois!’ continued the dabbler. ‘In fact I *loathe* the bourgeois. Give me a working-class Englishman over a middle-class anything, *any day*.’

‘What about a working-class Iranian?’ Farideh could not help herself. ‘Not a romantic gangster-with-a-heart type, but a real south Tehrani, with a *chadori* wife and a picture of the Supreme Leader on his wall?’ Was it jealousy, she wondered, that provoked her to cut them down, jealousy at the ones who liked to flash their international credentials? Or just anger at the casual snobbery, the objectification of the poor, seeing them as simply things of interest?

‘Absolutely – give me him over the interminable middle class!’ Everyone laughed. Except Farideh.

‘Maybe there is something exciting about *them* thinking of *us* as immoral sluts.’ The room laughed even louder, not noticing Farideh’s sarcasm. She forced a smile in time for her not to be discovered. Recently at these gatherings she had had a habit of sabotaging merriment. She could not understand why she was being so defensive of a class she did not understand, of a class she was capable of loathing, an entire stratum of society that she could write off with disdain at their backwardness.

Farideh left early. She got stuck in the Thursday night traffic on Vali Asr, an endless line of cars crammed together, inching forward; the chug of engines, horns hooting, music thudding. A queue had formed outside the glass-fronted *aash* and *haleem* shop, where cooks in white overalls were scooping up ladles of thick bean and noodle soup and wheat porridge from massive steel vats. A woman in a chador and pointed silver spiked-heeled boots was eating her *aash* on a blue plastic chair on the pavement. Above them all, strings of fairy lights flashing different colours hung between the lamp-posts and the sycamore trees were lit by red, blue and green flower-shaped lights set in the pavement below.

At home, Farideh fixed herself a whisky. Her son Alidad was picking at leftovers in the kitchen. He had spent the afternoon playing polo and was now getting ready to party.

‘Mum, did you hear about Delara?’

Delara was the young niece of one of her friends. For months, nobody had spoken of anything but Delara. She claimed to have been raped by three rich kids after they spiked her drink; Farideh had believed her story but many thought she had simply regretted a wild night out. Delara had a reputation. She liked to dance on tables in her bra drinking vodka and cherry juice; she liked one-night stands and she liked to Hoover up lines of coke and pop pills into everyone’s mouths.

‘She killed herself.’

Farideh clasped her neck with her hand. Alidad ran over to her and hugged her, kissing her on the forehead. ‘It happened tonight. She threw herself out of the apartment. And you know what, those bastards will be set free.’

After Delara had gone to hospital and then to the police station, all three boys had been arrested. But one of them had already escaped to Dubai. The remaining two had been sent to

Evin. Their fathers were rich and closely connected to the regime. Nobody thought for a minute that they would be found guilty.

Alidad offered to stay home and look after Farideh, but she insisted he go to his party. She began to cry as he closed the front door behind him.

Alidad had been out in the streets celebrating when Rouhani had been elected President; he had told her that everything would change, that everything would be different; it would just take time. She had heard this talk before – as far as she was concerned, change would not happen fast enough to make a difference to her life in Tehran.

She ran up to her room and started packing her bags. It was not too late for her to enjoy normality, to live out the rest of her years somewhere she would feel secure and free. She would go to London. Since the revolution her close friend Marjaneh had tried to persuade her to start afresh there. Now was her chance. Not that she could travel – she would have to get a visa first – but a packed suitcase, ready and waiting, would comfort her.

The rich kids were out in strength on Fereshteh Street; lines of glittering fast cars costing over 100 per cent extra with import tax – BMWs, Mercedes Benzes, Porsches, Ferraris, Lexuses and a Maserati – wound along the kerb outside the cafés and restaurants making the road look like a luxury car showroom. Alidad used to cruise here when he was younger. Once, near this spot, a *basiji* had searched his car and found a crate of Efes beer in the boot. Before Alidad had managed to stammer out ‘I can explain...’ the *basiji* had slammed the boot shut. ‘Go on, get lost. And don’t drive around with that shit in future,’ was all he had said.

Alidad slowed past the gangs of gorgeous girls. A black Ferrari driven by a boy who could not be older than twenty sped

past, zigzagging dangerously between the cars. A dervish was standing on the side of the road, bright green robe resting on his shoulders, long white hair flowing from a sapphire turban. In his right hand he was swinging a metal censer; white puffs of smoke from the burning of *esfand*, seeds of a weed, were rising out of it: spells to ward off the evil eye and expunge sorrow. The dervish's left hand was held out in supplication. Even the beggars on Fereshteh were upmarket.

By the time he got to Ana's house it was one o'clock in the morning; the party was pumping, Hot Chip was booming and everyone was dancing. Ana was single and in her late twenties, living on her own in a small apartment stuffed with retro shabby-chic furniture. She was one of the few Iranians who had kept the imperfect nose they had been born with, a handsome, strong, aquiline nose that had become her glory, a proud mark of her strength and individuality. Her nose would not be considered big in the West, but in Iran she had endured a lifetime of concerned relatives and family friends, even kindly strangers, cajoling her to have her nose carved into a more desirable shape, a more marriage-friendly shape – a narrow, pre-pubescent button nose, to be precise. She had refused. Ana was not one to conform. Growing up in the Islamic Republic had not impeded her dream of being a dancer. She trained in a studio in the city, where moves deemed too sexual by the Islamic Republic had to be scrapped. They could not even call what they did *dance*, but rather *movement*. Her troupe ended up touring Europe, working with celebrated choreographers in Madrid, Berlin and Paris. Now she designed jewellery.

Tonight Ana was dressed as a forties pin-up girl, hair in a quiff, shocking red lipstick on her pouty mouth. Beside her, a girl in a pair of brogues, pastel chequered trousers and a bow tie was

smoking a skunk joint with a rock chick with a shaved undercut in a black jumpsuit. This was the trendy crowd, and they were the kind of girls who wore baggy, vintage-looking *manteaus*. They were surrounded by a gaggle of adoring gay boys. Ana was holding the party in honour of her friend Jamshid's 'coming out' to his parents. During the protests in 2009, Jamshid had been arrested out on the streets. He had been taken to Evin where he was held for three weeks and interrogated while blindfolded every day. His interrogators had forced him to give them his email and Facebook passwords; at that moment he had been petrified, thinking his life must be over. His inboxes were full of messages from ex-boyfriends and graphic photographs of himself that he had sent to lovers. But the interrogators never mentioned them. Finally, on the last day, one of them had whispered in his ear: 'We know all about you and we know exactly how you like it. But we don't give a shit about that. That's your fucking problem. We just wanted to know you hadn't been acting against the regime.'

In the bedroom, a group of boys were gossiping and drinking from a bottle of Mr Chavez Blended Special Whisky – Extra Special, an Iraqi brew. Jamshid's new eighteen-year-old boyfriend had just got an exemption from military service by claiming he was a transsexual, a condition the regime viewed as an illness.

'You know, he could have just told them he was gay, they think we're mentally sick too. What could they do? It's not illegal to *be* gay, only to have gay sex.'

'Well that's a good thing, cos then half the fucking city would be arrested.'

'All of south Tehran would, that's for sure.'

'Oh God, I got to try me some south Tehran man, I love those strapping rough-and-ready barrow boys.'

‘You’ve seriously got to go south. If the middle classes are homosexuals, *all* the working-class boys are G-A-Y. Gay, gay, gay.’

‘Listen, it’s the same in any Muslim country, you can just clean up. It’s cos these poor bastards can’t get anywhere near pussy, that’s why we’re in business!’

The boys mostly met dates on the Internet. The Internet is the lifeblood of the gay scene in Tehran, specifically a gay social networking website called Manjam. Men all take risks – from webcam sex to picking up boys in Park-e Daneshjoo, cruising south Tehran and screwing in cars and alleys and public baths. The law on same-sex sodomy, which had just been amended, reflected the state’s twisted attitude towards homosexuality: if the sex is consensual and the man playing the active role is not married and a Muslim, he will be flogged 100 times, whereas the man who plays the passive role will be put to death (unless he is a kafir having sex with a Muslim, in which case they will both be killed). It is better to bugger than to be buggered.

In the kitchen a guy in high-top trainers was rapping Rumi poetry to a group of women who liked to joke that they were members of the militant underground group Lezbollah. Among them was one of Tehran’s most notorious lesbians, a hefty, butch woman who was startlingly successful at seducing straight marrieds. She had recently got married herself in San Francisco, to a blonde beauty who had left her husband – one of Tehran’s most desired catches – for her. Another two women were kissing in the hallway, evidently also affiliated to Lezbollah. The punishment for lesbianism, *mosahegheb*, is 100 lashes, but if lesbian acts are repeated four times, the death penalty can be applied – although none of these women or any of their friends had ever been caught.

Alidad moved between the groups, downing tequila shots and

getting stoned. He had grown up with this quixotic, eclectic group of friends; they were privileged but good people, non-judgemental and accepting. Even the ones who could afford a life abroad chose to stay. But they all knew the dancing and the partying were vital to their well-being, so they made sure they did it well.

A European diplomat friend helped push Farideh's visa application through. A month later she was on a plane to London. The plan was to spend three months with Marjaneh while she looked for a small apartment to buy. She would then divide her time between Tehran and London, for as long as she was legally permitted to stay.

Alidad could not understand why Farideh thought she would be happier in the West. He had visited friends in London, LA, New York, Paris, Rome – all the usual places – and always looked forward to getting back home. He liked to dip his toe in, to party and pull exotic foreign girls, but his life was in Tehran. He embraced it all, the good and the bad.

Farideh's first week in London was heavenly; Marjaneh took her to galleries, museums and restaurants, showing her everything she had been missing. Farideh was overcome with guilt that she had made her husband and her child endure Tehran when they could have had *this*: real freedom and all that came with it. But as the weeks wore on, she began to feel strangely disconnected from this new society around her. Life was more disparate and impersonal here. The gatherings and dinner parties were cold affairs, lacking in intensity. The bonds between Marjaneh and her friends were looser too; people had their own families and jobs to care about. Everyone watched the pennies. Cabs were extortionate. People were aggressive; they shouted and swore

at each other in the streets, even in Marjaneh's high-class area, something that rarely happened in north Tehran. When Farideh began to house-hunt, she realized how little her rials and tomans would buy her. Even if she sold everything and used up all her savings, she would only be able to buy a minuscule, dingy, one-bedroom apartment in Marjaneh's neighbourhood. Otherwise she would have to live in suburban hell, rows and rows of identical houses with crude gas boilers and tiny, sorry splodges of grass as gardens. And the weather never changed; one cold, grey, wet, drizzly day morphed into another.

After just two months, Farideh was surprised to discover that all she really wanted was to go back home. To Tehran.

'We had the first rain of the year last week. It was wonderful. Cleared up the pollution. You been away long?'

'A few months. What have I missed?'

'The same old – pardon my language madame – shit.'

Farideh laughed.

'Bet you wished you stayed away, eh?'

'Actually, I missed it here. Funny really.'

'I know, sometimes I think I want to take the whole family away from all of this, but I don't know if I'd be able to live anywhere else.' The taxi driver looked at her in the rear-view mirror. 'At least we're all in it together.'

Farideh smiled at him. 'Yes, you and I. Who would have thought.'

Now it was his turn to laugh.

The cab turned into Vali Asr. Two men were stripping a sheep's carcass in front of the Mercedes Benz showroom. Farideh wound the window right down and leant her head out. She never thought she would be so relieved to be back; wrapped in Tehran's

mountains, protected under her startling blue sky and warmed by her sun, enveloped by her trees, licked by her breeze, bursts of umber, russet and ochre now bleeding out of the leaves. They drove past the fruit stalls filled with the autumnal yellows and oranges of lemons, quinces and persimmons, the jumble and the chaos and the clamour, the smoky smell of lamb on hot coals which rubbed against her cheeks, the mulberry trees and the jasmine, the layers of dust, the splutter of vans, the man selling puppies at the side of the road, the swarms of motorbikes criss-crossing between beautiful girls in defiant clothes, the juice stands, the gold shops, the ancient bazaars and tunnelled walkways, the chipped blue tiles on magnificent, crumbling manor houses and the hidden gardens.

Farideh closed her eyes to savour the moment.