STORIES MY MOTHER TOLD ME

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A picnic and a warm day, but my mother shivers. Eating outside has never appealed to her. She removes food from the basket, and were it not for the soft earth beneath, her dissatisfaction would be heard.

My mother lives alone, and she prefers her outings to involve her grandson. She hates living alone, but since my father died two years ago, that has been her charge. And with it, loneliness and grief and frustration. Still, despite my son Faraz's absence, she is here, mainly because I asked her to be. In her old age, my mother has become more eager to please me, even though she knows I won't let her live with us. My family and I are moving to California, the other side of the country, in two weeks, and she wants to go with us.

My mother wants to take Faraz on long walks and to teach my American wife how to cook Persian dishes. My mother would tell my family her stories. But like me, my wife and son would realize the irrelevance of these stories. We are American, and we're heading west.

My mother can't even remember her own stories. Many times, I asked her to retell a tale, and she said, "I don't remember that one. It must not have been very good." I always claimed, *It was!* She took advantage of my enthusiasm and told me a new story, which she would later forget. Though I only heard some of my mother's stories once and only half-listened to others, they are returning now, pouring out from the recesses of my memory like they have something to prove. Stories are nonsense and disappointment—something your mother never remembers or cares about once you're grown up. It's like your life as a child was a lie. I won't let the stories out to contaminate my own son. I will rid myself of the anxiety these tales impose. Today, I will return these stories to my mother, and I'll be ready to leave her and her cautionary tales, her happily-ever-afters, her family histories, her nonsense, her failed imagination.

Okay, one hundred birds walk into a sports bar. An old man in a Hawaiian shirt sitting on a stool turns to check them out, but he's seen crazier. The bartender is bald and wears a t-shirt with sleeves ripped off. He looks like he should work in a tougher venue.

The birds rejoice because they basically have the place to themselves, except for the old man in the Hawaiian shirt. Party central—feathers and sunflower seed shells on the floor. Toilets filled with white shit. Birds perched on stools shoved around by birds behind them trying to get a drink. Hummingbirds piss everyone off by hovering behind the bar, drinking the beer straight from the tap. All the birds laugh at the clumsy men on the televisions.

The old man in the Hawaiian shirt can hardly stand it. He tells the birds that there is a bird named Simorgh who can grant them true happiness at a bar called Qaf. *Qaf* means mountain, which is a pretty

bad name for a bar. Anyway, all of the birds quiet down, turn to one another with looks of delight. Birds are generally depressive creatures, which is probably why they drink so much. The birds spend hours discussing the idea of Simorgh. One says, "He's a robot!" Another says, "No, he's the mystic Rumi." And another says, "A space child from another dimension." Finally, the man in the Hawaiian shirt gives them directions to Qaf.

The bartender remembers money, profit, and suddenly doesn't like the idea of losing all these customers. Birds drink a lot, and they tip well. The bartender discounts all of his alcohol just as the birds are ready to leave. Needless to say, half of the birds decide to stay. To the old man's dismay, most of the birds that remain are bluebirds and titmice. The other half of the birds shake their heads or bob them up and down in disgust and head out for Qaf.

Halfway down 1st Avenue, the birds encounter a hot dog stand. Well, the sign says "Hot Dogs," but the vender also sells hamburgers, pizza, and nachos. Nine drunk birds can't resist, so they stay to try everything on the dry-erase board menu.

The rest of the birds hang a right onto MLK Boulevard. As they cross 2nd Avenue, they run across a Ben Franklin lying on the ground. A male redbird snatches it and declares he's going to buy a new stereo. Another male redbird doesn't think it's fair that one bird gets the money when they all found it together. So, he starts a fight. The rest of the birds sense this conflict could last a while, and they move on.

On the corner of MLK and 5th Avenue is the largest nudie bar the birds have ever seen. It's called Lavand, doves strut their stuff out front. Nine birds are lost.

NINE DRUNK BIRDS CAN'T RESIST SO THEY STAY TO TRY EVERYTHING ON THE DRY-ERASE-BOARD MENU.

Thirty birds walk into Qaf. From the outside on 7th Avenue, it looks like a typical bar: neon sign that reads "Qaf" followed by a little neon mountain. Inside, though, is a glorious sight. The birds are surrounded by mirrors. Not just on the walls, but on the ceiling and floor. There is a lantern in the middle of the room, and its light dances all around them. The light also reflects playfully in the mirrors. On and on. The thirty birds mull about, looking for this guy Simorgh. Even after hours, all they see are their own reflections. The birds are lost.

"No," my mother says, "that isn't right. It's filthy."

"I made it real."

"It's just like your baseball, Massoud," she says. "You want to wear it like you're proud. But it has nothing to do with you."

When I was in high school, she burned my letter jacket because she didn't want me playing baseball. She'd put up with it for so many years. But that jacket pushed her too far.

As I protested the smell of burning wool and leather, she smiled nice and wide, and her eyes wouldn't focus. She looked drunk, only she hadn't touched a drink in her entire life. An act of heroism.

My father didn't have much to say about it. He just shook his head in disgust, which was all he could do, really, not because he loved her but because my mother was what Americans call a force. I could never see through this power of my mother's, to see her love for my dad or me. Surely, she must have loved us terribly, must have sacrificed a great deal. What else justified the anger that went along with that power?

"In California," my mother says, "they are filthy. There are hippies and drugs." I laugh at her, and she smiles. Then, she says, "I have a secret to tell you about your father."

I ask her to tell me, but she says that I must wait. "Mother," I say, "you must tell me." But she refuses. She tells me to continue with my stories.

Qays and Leyli were in love. Both fathers were chieftains. Both families were well off and were respected. Yet, there were rumors about Qays being insane. One night, the townspeople said that Qays sheared a sheep and ate the wool. Leyli's father refused to have her marry Qays. She was only to see him one last time to say goodbye. Qays gave Leyli a ring and promised to love her forever. He said that he would go out in search of her and that eventually they'd be together.

Qays went on his own journey, one that he chose for himself. He knew he must struggle to earn Leyli. He refused food and stayed in the desert on the outskirts of town. The townspeople could hear his mad cries. He sang songs of strange beings in love that were dying on the beach with no water. His words were odd, his sounds off-key. They said he ate the dirt and the rocks and heat. They said he spoke to the snakes. Qays became "Majnun," meaning "crazy for love," to all but Leyli.

Leyli wandered, too, but within the city walls. She stayed away from her family. Even when at home, she remained outside, secluded in the walled-in family garden. She spent her months alone growing the garden into astounding lushness. Her mother said to her father in privacy, "It is like she has found a child now that her lover has gone."

After months, Majnun returned to the city. In its alleys, policemen beat him up, mistaking him for a thief.

When he arrived at Leyli's home, her father still refused to let Majnun see her. Too tired to fight, Majnun turned away. As he rounded the corner of the property, he heard a song, like a nightingale. He listened and knew that it sang his sound.

He climbed the high wall. On the other side was the garden. And Leyli.

Clinging to the top of the wall, Majnun called out to her. She didn't hear him. He fell, and the ground met him with a lover's embrace. Leyli kept on singing. She became famous but never married. She died a very old woman.

"Is that one better?" I ask her.

"Yes," she says. "It's more like how I told it." She stares at this ten-year-old playing Frisbee with his cocker spaniel. "But I told it better."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Oh, it's not your fault," my mother sighs. "You just don't have enough poetry in you. It's your American side. So, so—" Her voice trails off, and she gestures toward the boy and his dog. "In California, you won't let Faraz surf, will you? It's dangerous."

"Don't worry. He knows how to swim."

"Does he know how to stop an earthquake?"

"What is it about my father?"

"Was he really a father to you, Massoud?" She eats some torshi, and makes her sour-eating face. "My secret is for the end of the day, when you are done talking. My secret is not about childish things."

A boy prince, the Prince of the World Before the World. He traveled the Great Blackness looking for something to fill the planet. He brought back a little bit of everything. Sparkling rings, nebulous clouds, novas, supernovas, black holes, wormholes. Dust and darkness. Everything in between. Except a sun, for he couldn't hold onto any of the younger stars, which were slippery things. So, he returned home with all the splendor of the universe and no light to see it by, no warmth by which to feel its beauty. He swore to his people that he would return with the fire. That's why the Prince of the World Before the World left again.

The Prince of the World Before the World discovered a planet made of water. When he came down onto it, he found women waiting for him. They told him they were sad, and the water of the planet consisted solely of their tears. But the water was fresh, the tears without salt. The Prince didn't understand how that could be: sorrow was always accompanied by something else. *No,* the women said, *that is happiness. Sadness is*

pure. He asked the pure ones where he could find a fire that he could take home with him. The women just cried.

The Prince of the World Before the World discovered a planet made of earth. The Prince found it strange, the dirt. On his planet, the ground was made of sand. Earth resembled sand but was darker and moister. The Prince relished its difference. He felt that fire must be nearby because this earth looked burned. He called out. The earth itself vibrated in answer. The Prince wrote out a message in the dirt. The earth erased it, and responded in like manner: *Fire is inside me.* When the Prince asked if he might have some, the land began to break apart. Whether the earth was angry or accommodating, the Prince could not tell. He had to leave or die.

The Prince of the World Before the World discovered a planet made of wind that moved nothing. He found all the trees young because they did not need to grow, to age. The Prince listened and he could hear the wind. He could hear it well. He thought he felt it, too. He asked the leaves if they could feel the wind. *Of course, silly,* they said. He asked the leaves why then they did not move. *We don't know this word, move.* The Prince jumped up and down. *Only the wind moves. If we move, we become the wind.* Perplexed, the Prince asked the leaves where he could find a fire he could take home with him. The leaves asked their young trees, who screamed in horror. They told the Prince that Mother Wind had banished fire long ago to a place far away in the Great Blackness. The Prince asked where, and the young trees told him they did not want to know.

The Prince of the World Before the World hovered in the Great Blackness, facing everywhere the stars he could not conquer. He discovered there was no planet made of fire. This is why the Prince of the World Before the World never returned. But he was warm out there. And safe. Like the young trees, he had no need to age.

My mother wrinkles her nose. "When did I tell you that one?"

"In second grade," I tell her. "I was home with the chicken pox, and you were feeding me four oranges a day."

"Oranges are good for you when you're sick."

"Do you remember the story?" I ask.

"No, but does it matter?" she asks. "If you remember it, then it's important, like a dream. Maybe Baha'u'llah wants you to remember for a reason."

I recite:

> O SON OF MAN!
> Write all that We have revealed unto thee with the ink of light upon the tablet of thy spirit. Should this not be in thy power, then make thine ink of the essence of thy heart. If this thou canst not do, then write with that crimson ink that hath been shed in My path. Sweeter indeed is this to Me than all else, that its light may endure for ever." (Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words)*

"I'm glad you remember God," my mother says.

And then I am my mother: "I met your father when I was at Baha'i school in North Carolina. I heard his voice even before I saw him. I knew, I knew I was going to marry him. His voice was so calm. I asked Elizabeth Green to introduce us. He said he fell in love with my hair.

"Then, I had to go back to Augusta. He was on a military base in Colorado because he was drafted. He wrote me letters. These letters were so beautiful. You can't believe it, Massoud. I'll show you if you want me to. He wrote letters for years until the army let him go.

"The letter when he proposed I read to everybody in the ER, and they all said, 'No wonder you cry when you read these letters.' Even the doctors said so.

"Still, your father wanted to ask my father for permission. So, he sent his letter to Iran. He wrote one to his parents. I also sent a letter to my parents and his parents. Everyone asked permission. We were

worried the letters from Iran wouldn't come back in time for May, but they did.

"It was the worst day. The cake melted. I should have known then."

Having finished the story, I ask my mother. "Do you remember your own words?"

"Those are *your* words," she says. "It's true the wedding wasn't so good, but I always told you I didn't care. I loved your father."

"Is that your secret? Or is the *opposite* your secret? You cannot keep this from me."

"My secret has nothing to do with hurt. I loved your father."

But her words killed him a long time ago, not with anger. With something else.

A woman in a hooded white robe enters. Everyone stares at her. She is the first goddess. Light and pain emit from her core, and seconds later everyone is dead. She is the last goddess. And the best.

When I was eleven, I dreamt that my mother died at the hospital where she worked. In my dream, I saw her walking down a hospital corridor, toward the white light of death, indiscernible from that of the hospital. My mother was wearing her white uniform, too. After this, I was certain my mother really was going to die at work. I was young enough to believe.

I'm not sure why I was so afraid of my mother dying, but often, I pretended to be sick so she would stay home.

When I got older, I pretended to be well.

Now, she is retired. I should be relieved because I still believe in that dream. I am not relieved. Now, I am afraid my mother will never die.

A barren landscape. People made of stone. What could wake them? They are still and cold if you dare to touch them. One day, a traveling salesman came through with a lamp. Whatever stone its light touched melted into flesh. The traveling salesman was so frightened he left without the lamp. The Stone People,

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now melted, wandered aimlessly for a while, but after a few days, one of their young took charge. He realized the value of the lamp. After a few weeks, however, so did everyone else. Every merchant who came through wished to "pay respects" by adorning the lamp with jewels or gold.

One day a messenger came from the King. He told the Stone People that the King was confiscating the lamp because it was so precious. The Stone People possessed no weapons, so they couldn't prevent the King's men from taking the lamp.

At the palace, the King adorned the lamp with more and more jewels. He placed it in the court, inside a glass case. Followers came from far and wide to see the Wonderlamp.

The Stone People quickly turned back into rocks, boulders.

Eventually, the King tired of the Wonderlamp. It fell into the hands of merchants, then thieves who stripped it bare of wealth.

Then, one day . . .

A traveling salesman arrived with a lamp. People made of stone were warmed by its light. As stone, their dreams were light. Had they finally become their dreams? Perhaps, but we must wait for the King to come again.

"I remember this one," my mother says. "I didn't write it. It's a book you had. I think it was called *The Wonderlamp.*"

"You told me I didn't have books when I was younger."

"Well, one or two," she says. "This one was good and clean. The stone people are the faithless."

"So, God is a lamp?" I ask.

"No, no. It's a story."

"Can light make stone into flesh, the dead into the living?"

My mother sighs, and says, "If it's supposed to be the light of God."

"And does the light of God make life?"

"Yes."

"And does it make love?"

"Yes." She stands up with a little effort and shields her eyes so she can look across the sunny field. After a moment, she turns to me to tell me about a news story that she saw about an earthquake, about

THE WIND IS SO ELEGANT TODAY.

the poor and the poorly constructed homes. About how no one knows what to do. She asks me if I know what to do. I tell her that I know to stand in the doorway. Then, I just stare, still stuck on the field and this day. I wonder why no one is flying kites. The wind is so elegant today.

Mullah Nasr al-din was a rich man who would go to the public square and give away his money. Yet, he often borrowed items from those who lived near him. One day, he borrowed a pot from one of his neighbors.

In this pot, Nasr al-din cooked *fesenjaan*, which was very good. Then, he returned the pot.

Inside, the owner found a smaller pot. The neighbor said, "Nasr al-din, you only borrowed one pot."

Nasr al-din replied, "Yes, but the pot was pregnant."

Again, Nasr al-din borrowed a bigger pot, but from a different neighbor. He cooked *ghormeh sabzi*, which was very good. Then, he returned the pot.

Inside the owner found another pot, though this pot inside the pot was larger than the first one. Again, the initial pot was pregnant.

And so, Nasr al-din kept borrowing bigger and bigger pots.

Until one day, he borrowed the biggest pot in town. He cooked many things, which were all very good. Then, he returned the pot. But without another pot inside it. This neighbor said, "Nasr al-din, was this pot not pregnant, too?"

Nasr al-din replied, "Yes, but the child died at birth."

My mother recites the punch line with me. "That one I love. It used to be my father's favorite."

I don't have a picture of my grandfather. I never met him. He died when I was six. My father answered the phone and silently handed the phone to my mother. I like to think in that silence I knew something was wrong. But it was my father who had the courage to hold my mother as she cried and shook. Part of her grief was knowing she couldn't go to the funeral, couldn't go back to Iran because she was Baha'i.

She told me once years later that the grave, like many Baha'i graves, had been lost, built upon. So if we ever want to visit his grave, we'll have to enter an office building, a gas station, or maybe someone else's home. This is what it means to have family. The dead require you to enter someone else's home. My family is my own. The dead are dead.

Uncle Mahmed falls in love with an American girl. They have a beautiful baby girl and name her Jessica.

After many years of working hard, Mahmed slows down. He begins to look around. Jessica has grown. Silky black hair, eyes like his own mother's. But his wife, the American girl, won't allow Mahmed to sit still. Money, she demands. He obeys because he doesn't know what else to do. The American girl demands so rarely. So, Mahmed believes her actions sincere and justified. He works hard.

Years later, he has no friends. He works for IBM, and at home all he does is surf the Internet for odd pieces of knowledge. The American girl eats ice cream and doesn't move when he touches her. Through Jessica, his mother's eyes chide him: *I told you to marry a nice Persian girl.*

"Did you get the bonus?" the American girl asks.

"Yes."

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"Yes."

When they have been married for six years, Mahmed notices the American girl spending many nights out with her friends. He knows her secret. Still, upon confronting her and hearing her confession, Mahmed senses the piercing pain of his mother's god.

That weekend, while his wife shops and his daughter is at a friend's house, he hangs himself.

"It was such a tragedy," my mother says.

"You know," I say, "in *The Divine Comedy*, the spirits of suicides are captured in young trees."

"I don't know anything about this comedy," my mother says. "I don't think it sounds very funny."

"He was only your second cousin, right?"

"It's a lesson," she says. "His sisters and his mother told him not to marry her. They loved him and knew best. You should have listened to me before you got married."

"But you married an American, too," I say.

"It's not about American," she yells. "It's about believing in God, being good and clean. That wife of yours, I need to teach her. She would probably go outside for ice cream during an earthquake."

I tell my mother that my wife isn't a child, and my mother says that we're all children until someone we love dies.

There was a young girl who walked on walls. She proved thus her courage. Always, however, the young girl wanted to jump off the wall. Most girls her age wanted to fly up into the sky, but she wanted to fly down at the ground. The earth itself was foreign to her the way the sky was to many of her friends.

Day after day, the girl climbed up the wall and walked its perimeter. She stopped at various points to study the ground.

Earth whispered to her: *Jump.*

The father saw his daughter as some sort of bird, perched on their garden wall constantly. He knew you could not force a bird to come to you. Rather, you had to entice the bird with a treat. Over the next days and weeks, he scattered various seeds on the ground.

The young girl remained on the wall.

Earth sang her songs, melodious and in need of no words. She swayed in rhythm atop the wall.

The father became frightened for his daughter's life. As he paced their home, his wife asked him what troubled him. He told her of the problem and his failed solution. She laughed at him. Little girls are not birds. The mother scattered apricot slices on the ground because she knew little girls liked apricots.

The young girl remained on the wall.

Earth increased the volume and speed. The young girl danced maniacally.

The parents consulted a wise man. He told them to leave their daughter alone. So, they did.

The little girl remained on the wall.

Earth got tired and silent.

One day, soldiers came and took the parents away. They did not see the little girl atop the wall.

The little girl remained on the wall.

Months and months. Strange plants began to grow. The garden lost its shape. The little girl could no longer see the ground. *Oh, Father, what have you done?* She jumped to the earth, fearing she could not make it through the plant growth. And yet her body hit with such force that Earth shook, bled even as she bled. Like seeds and apricots, the young girl became part of the mayhem.

My mother has stormed off and now stands in the field underneath the sun at some distance from me. Could she have heard my story, my whispering? I know she loved him. It's myself I'm unsure of, my love for my parents I'm unsure of.

A postcard. Painting of an old conquest, which hangs in a building named for its pillars. Twenty pillars . . . forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred. No, just twenty but known for twice that. In a building made of mirrors, multiplication is necessary.

Math. Ayyám-i-Há. Days outside of time. On the postcard, Mother writes to Father about Baha'i holidays, about missing him, about love—in her broken English. Her English, like her stories, piecemeal. She buries my head in the sand with her stories. Down there, it's silver and gold, pure blue, shattered glass.

Here and now, in a place much too close, a place surrounded by hills, a son and a mother picnic. She is old and tired but still filled with hopes. He struggles to understand too many things.

When the son was a child, his mother told him stories, as most mothers do. Except most of her stories didn't originate in books. So, the son eventually came to believe his function was to remember these stories. He always thought he would need to pass them on. Instead, today he tries to return these stories.

The son himself became a father. And then the son's own father passed away. The son began to wonder what the father's duty was. The son was plagued with guilt at the frivolity of his mother's stories and at his trouble remembering them. Making a story matter is impossible though, and trying to remember is like waiting for birds to eat from your palm.

His own father never told him a single story.

The son realized too slowly how much he loved his own father. The son realized too slowly as he viewed his father's varnished body that the recognizable always eludes you. But the struggle satisfies. He realized too slowly as he viewed his father's varnished body that his relationship with his father was, is, as intimate as it gets. Neither God nor a lover can compare. He realized too slowly as he viewed his father's varnished body that the father's best duty is that of real absence. The mother is always telling stories. The father is always unknown. In death now, the father shows the son what a story is, desire. To know, not remember. Without the father here, his life opens to interpretation, and the father's own stories scribble themselves out so slowly. And these tales are true and relevant, present and in the present.

Even as the son struggles to know his father, his mother's stories interfere. He wonders how to keep his own son safe. He will tell his own son that stories never aid in reality, that the best stories are real.

Today, the son will return his mother's stories, and he'll be successful. Years from now, his own son will look at him and say, "Father, tell me the story of your life." And the once son and now father will begin in language made of wood and earth, a language that his son cannot refuse.

"Those aren't my stories," my mother says, returning to her seat on the blanket. She begins packing up the food.

"Then, where did they come from?" I ask.

She eats the last *dolmeh* and turns around to gauge the distance back to the car.

"You don't understand," I say. "All stories are unhealthy."

"You're doing good, and you heard plenty of stories."

"I'm not doing well."

SHE BURIES MY HEAD IN THE SAND WITH HER STORIES. DOWN THERE, IT'S SILVER AND GOLD, PURE BLUE, SHATTERED GLASS.

"What's wrong?" My mother crumples a napkin, waiting. "You're too serious," she says, "like your father."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

"Stories," she says, "they make it right."

"Make what right?" I ask.

"Stories are for loneliness," she says. "Like when you are going to leave me all alone. Like when your father did."

"He died of a heart attack. He didn't leave." She confuses me once again. "You told me about that day, that day when he died."

"But what is a heart attack?" she asks. She stares up at the sun and then rubs her eyes. "No nurse can tell you what you want to know. I'll mail you his death certificate after you leave for California. Then, you will have to come back and tell me the true story."

My grandfather was fifty-two years old when he died. He died in the bathtub, slipped and hit his head. I think of how the last thing he saw was white plastic. Or maybe the bathtubs in Iran are stone, marble. Still, it was a good, clean way to die.

But this isn't the truth. He died in a hospital.

What lie has she told me? What lie is she telling me? These things happen when you try to tell a story. Important details slip away, and eventually, you're left not knowing what killed your father. What will someday come for your mother, who has made herself the goddess of stories, the goddess of an irresistible story. She always wins.

My mother shakes her black hair, gray at the roots, and says with a mouth full of food, "Your problem is that you never listen."

I try to listen to this world. I really do. But before my very eyes, my mother's hair becomes the wind and carries her away. A stream of blood trails behind, whispering to me of old lives and new deaths—of *her* story. The lustful imagination of a raw grape leaf in one's mouth. The hateful reality of a sunny day. And I know it is left to me to tell the stories, all of them.