

The
Ruby
Tear Catcher

An Iranian Woman's Story of Intolerance
A Novel

Nahid Sewell

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Dedicated to my brave sisters
in the Middle East.

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 My name is Leila, and my story begins in the hills north of Tehran where I was born thirty years ago. Except for my years in college, Tehran has been my home. The Tehran of my youth bustled late into the night, with children in the park enjoying the taste and texture of blue and pink cotton candy on their tongues while their parents cracked pumpkin seeds and gossiped with neighbors. Clandestine lovers met hand in hand at twilight, dreaming of romance and of the day they would marry. Here I learned to savor life in its multitude of colors and tastes. I embraced the scorching heat and dust of summer, knowing winter's fresh snow would cleanse the air, blanket trees, and scatter glistening ice palaces atop the Alborz Mountains. Back then, I lived in the safety of my family, my community, my beautiful city.

Today it's a different Tehran. Life is a monochromatic gray canvas desperate for brushstrokes of color. Children are secluded in the safety of homes. Lovers, if discovered, are arrested, even stoned to death. Soldiers' heavy boots stamp bas-relief footprints in the powdery white snow.

Aside from my memories, a ruby tear catcher is all I have left from the Tehran of my youth.

ONE

It was a gray morning in 1988, the air rich with a loamy dampness after a rare rain the night before. I looked out the kitchen window at the swallow bathing in a shallow puddle on the brick patio. His fluttering wings sprayed raindrops across his back as he flew away. I took two aspirin from the cabinet and swallowed them dry to ease my headache. Forcing a good-bye to my husband, Farhad, I prepared to make the trip to my grandmother's. Yes, by this time I was married, with another childhood dream tottering on the verge of extinction. Like other men in Iran, Farhad expected his wife to cater to his desires and respond only with deference, even in the face of a sour mood or a beating. He spent years attending university in the U.S., but if he'd ever held Western notions of respect for women, they'd been tossed aside long ago. Small deviations in daily routines caused him to seethe with anger, yet he blithely ignored obscene atrocities right before his eyes. If dinner wasn't ready when he came home, even if he was hours earlier than expected or if he was late and the rice had dried, I was to blame. But humans slaughtered in the name of religion raised in him less empathy than a beggar on the street.

As I got ready to leave that morning, I saw reflected in the mirror the image of a stranger, face drawn with anguish, a flaring purple bruise on her cheek, eyes swollen and bloodshot from weeping. I gently touched the cheek Farhad had slapped the night before and shivered in pain, an outward sign of my soul's growing despair. The blow came when I confronted him about his mistress. By morning, he was remorseful, with yet another promise to end his physical violence. But his abusive streak, concealed earlier in our relationship, now pushed me deeper into darkened isolation. How did I arrive at this place, and how much longer could I tolerate this life?

For weeks now I'd been visiting my grandmother every day. She lived alone, and her health was steadily declining. Maman Rouhi, as we called her, clung to her Iranian traditions, never comfortable removing her head scarf. Approaching eighty, she stood barely five feet tall, her hands tanned by the sun and gnarled with arthritis. She was wiry and emaciated yet possessed a hidden endurance that belied her frail appearance. Black kohl decorating her dark brown eyes, she was every bit the classic Persian grandmother.

When my parents fled Iran, she lost the home she'd shared with us for years, but she retained our cook, Fatemeh, and Mahmood, our chauffeur. It broke her heart to think of letting them go; they'd loyally served our family for nearly thirty years. Plus, the extra help and companionship were welcome. As a child, Fatemeh spoiled me, sneaking after-dinner treats my mother denied me. And Mahmood, involuntary eavesdropper on my conversations with girlfriends as he drove us here and there, was like a surrogate parent. With a Hercule Poirot mustache gracing his gaunt tan face, he cared for me as a father for his daughter.

Now outside my house, Mahmood stood curbside in his dark jacket and cap holding open the back door of the old Range Rover. He'd retired his Western ties but took great pride in his chauffeur's cap, a relic of kinder days. The battered green car with its cracked and faded black leather seats held memories of my childhood, all girlish giggles and whispered confidences.

"Good morning, Leila *khanoom*," he said, smiling broadly.

"Good morning, Mahmood *agha*." The agha salutation showed my respect despite his societal ranking. Ashamed to be seen as yet another abused Iranian wife, I pulled my head scarf closer around my face, hoping he wouldn't notice the bruise. I put on oversized dark sunglasses to hide my swollen eyes. Whatever he may have noticed, he said nothing.

He closed the door behind me and began the short journey to Grandmother's. The narrow streets overflowed with cars and trucks. Thick smoke billowed from rattling mufflers, swelling the opaque brown cloud that blanketed the city. In a mad dash, drivers jockeyed for position with blatant disregard for lane markings and traffic signals, competing with bicycles, motorbikes, and pedestrians who, against all odds, were rarely the victims of this chaos.

Glancing in the mirror, Mahmood said, "Your grandmother believes this to be an ominous day. This morning, while she was having breakfast, a little bird hit the kitchen window and died. She took it as a bad sign and is quite upset."

"Being alone isn't good for her, and she really misses my parents."

"How are your father and mother? Have you heard from them?" Mahmood's love and respect for my father was unwavering, and the guilty pronouncements by the Governing Council would not sway his opinion. He would never be convinced that my father was anything but a blessing from Allah.

"They're well, Mahmood, and send greetings. Maman's not happy to be away from home, but they're starting to make a new life in Paris. And they live close to Uncle Mohsen. Of course, Maman still complains of her aches and pains."

"With all due respect, her aches and pains have their source in her head," he said with a hearty laugh.

"You're so right." Since my brother and I were old enough to notice, my mother was constant victim to new maladies and afflictions. Even Grandmother laughed as Maman bartered for sympathy down the wandering paths of hypochondria.

We turned onto Negar Alley, now called Shaheed Salimi, presumably honoring some martyr. Following the revolution, streets were renamed for martyrs and religious figures, but whether it was due to rebellion or just difficulty remembering, most of us privately used the old names. Mahmood was out of the car holding the door before I could move.

"You spoil me. Farhad would disapprove."

"Then he's a fool, little one. Kindness is a blessing always returned," he said, with a short bow. While he would never admit it, Mahmood disapproved of my husband.

Climbing the concrete steps to the house, I opened the polished dark mahogany door, glistening from its new coat of varnish. Inside, I heard Maman Rouhi. "*Azizam*, I'm upstairs." I loved it when she used that endearing term.

I saw the beaming face of the world's best cook, besides my mother. "*Salam*, Fatemeh *khanoom*. How are you today?" I handed her my *roopoosh*, the black cloak covering my body, a "gift" of the Islamic government to Iranian women. For now, I kept on

my head scarf.

“As well as can be expected for one so old,” she said, fishing for a compliment.

“Don’t be silly. You look younger than me, and you’re twice as healthy,” I replied, playing my role. “You still have no wrinkles.”

She noticed the bruise on my cheek, but in deference turned her head. With a gentle smile, she scurried back to the kitchen to make fresh tea on the electric samovar. The Russian brass samovar that used burning coals to heat the water had long ago been placed in storage. The stairs creaked as I climbed to the second floor, holding the smooth wooden banister.

“*Salam*, Maman Rouhi.”

“Come here,” she said, holding out her arms. I took off my sunglasses and slipped them in my purse. With her failing eyesight, she’d never notice the bruise.

A bright rose-printed bedspread covered her spindly legs as she leaned against the pillows. Sunlight streamed through the nearby window and glistened off the polished wood floors, highlighting a corner of the Tabriz carpet my grandfather had bought for her many years ago. It was an antique, its dense orange and beige floral motif adding dazzling colors to the otherwise bare room. A small mahogany table stood next to her bed, a much-loved picture of my grandfather and another of my parents displayed beside a worn copy of the Koran. There was a picture of my brother, Amir, in his navy cap and gown, the white tassel dangling to the right, his broad smile showing the dazzle of naturally perfect teeth. I’d taken the picture in the U.S. at his college graduation, a ceremony only I could attend. Maman Rouhi held my hand as I sat on the corner of her bed. A wide strand of straight brown hair wandered haphazardly across her wrinkled forehead like a curtain drawn at the theater, tucked behind an ear. I smiled as I caught a glimpse of the birthmark on her neck, the one she’d passed on to my mother and me. Her other hand clutched her amber prayer beads, clicking each bead as they slipped through her trembling fingers. I knew she was worried when the beads, a pilgrimage gift my grandfather brought back from Mecca, were in her hand. She held me for several minutes, mumbling prayers in Arabic.

Fatemeh walked in carrying a silver tray with small glass teacups on delicate gold inlaid saucers flanked by sugar cubes and *nabat* rock

candy. I loved letting the tea slowly melt the sweetness of *nabat* in my mouth.

"I gave your grandmother some aspirin this morning," Fatemeh said, averting her eyes from my bruised cheek. "She was a bit feverish, so I called Dr. Soleimani and asked him to stop by later."

I handed Grandmother her teacup as she popped a piece of *nabat* in her mouth. She slipped it under her tongue, a trick she'd taught me to prolong the pleasure, and began sipping the strong dark liquid while warming her hands with the cup. Like a flower braced against winter, Maman Rouhi looked shriveled and drawn with concern. I brushed back her hair, feeling tiny beads of a worry sweat lining the furrows along her forehead.

Suddenly from downstairs there was a loud commotion, angry shouts, and stomping feet. Grandmother grasped my hand tightly as I stood up and wouldn't let go. Without notice, three uniformed men barged into the room, rifles in hand, while Fatemeh and Mahmood trailed behind, yelling they must wait to be escorted.

"Why do you barge into an old woman's house?" I asked the uniformed man in the lead.

"*Allah o Akbar*. In the name of God Almighty, you are under arrest for crimes against the Islamic Republic." His eyes glinted with an unforgiving light.

"What crimes? I've committed no crimes." I tried to sound confident and defiant, aware my hands were trembling.

"You are accountable for crimes committed by your family. You are coming with us."

"Where is the warrant for my arrest?" I demanded, knowing full well they wouldn't leave empty-handed.

As the soldier grabbed me from behind and shoved me toward the door, my grandmother shot from bed with a vitality that surprised everyone. She grasped my arm and began pulling me away. With the back of his hand, the soldier struck her, knocking her down, prayer beads bouncing noisily like amber pearls across the wood floor, resting only as they bumped the edge of the Tabriz rug. I watched in horror as another soldier pointed his rifle at Mahmood and Fatemeh as they rushed to help her. I felt something strike the back of my head, and then everything went dark.