

The Persian Lover

When my eyes focused again I saw Reza above me propped on one elbow, his dark eyes squinting against the curl of smoke from the cigarette in his mouth. I rolled into him, kissing the hollows of his collarbones, smelling the perfume of his skin: sweat, cigarettes, almonds, and felt the tingle of desire start again. I slid my mouth down his body, but he laughed and moved away.

“Time to go, Chérie,” he said, standing up, smoothing his black hair away from his face.

He was the timekeeper, the one who made sure we got back to the dorms before my curfew. As seniors, we could have signed out for overnights, no questions asked, only we had no place to go. We certainly couldn’t stay there in the college theater where we made love on a lumpy mattress. We were lucky to have even that, and had it only because Reza designed the sets for the plays the theater department put on and had a key to the building.

“Chérie!” he said, his voice sharp.

“Sorry,” I said, quickly dressing.

He reached the stage door first, tapping his fingers against the metal as he waited for me.

“Sorry,” I said, again, and stepped out into the warm May night, the air soft and languid and smelling of wisteria. Beyond the campus, the streets of the suburban Long Island community were dark and quiet. It was there we had met on a dreary October day. I had slipped and fallen on wet leaves, landing at someone’s feet. When I looked up I saw Reza.

“Remember . . .” I said, but he was striding across campus on his way to the dorms. I hurried after him, wanting to point out the crescent moon hanging suspended in the blue-black sky like a shining scimitar, but couldn’t catch up. As we said goodnight at my dorm I tried to prolong our embrace, but he was impatient to get back to his books; with finals starting the next day, he no longer had time for me.

That was Saturday. I looked for him Sunday at breakfast, then at lunch, at dinner. Nor did I see him the next day or the day after. Wednesday, I left a note in his mailbox: “When will I see you?” That evening, I checked his dorm and was told he had signed out early that morning. I asked for his roommate, Manny Auerbach. He also was signed out.

“He’s gone,” I told roommate, Sandy. “He wasn’t supposed to leave until after graduation. How could he just disappear like that?”

He had said at the start we mustn’t fall in love because we had no future. After graduation, he had to return to his family: to Paris, where he was born and raised, and where his parents lived, then to Tehran, where his grandfather, the patriarch, was. There, Reza would take his place in the family’s rug business and marry some girl the grandfather would pick out for him. That was the way things were. It was his culture, and I accepted it.

The knowledge that our relationship would end on graduation day had made our love more intense, our lovemaking more passionate. Yet, as the end approached, I began to hope Reza would defy his family and refuse to leave me. Instead, he had gone off without a good-bye, not even a note. The coward.

“Get real,” Sandy said. “He can’t have left because he hasn’t graduated.”

“Then what happened?”

“Who knows? You’ll find out when you see him again,” she said, getting out the metal box she called the Jewel Box. She unlocked it and removed the top tier with its array of junk jewelry to reveal the “jewels” underneath: an assortment of pill samples—uppers, downers, painkillers—she had taken from her doctor-father’s office. “Here,” she said, holding out a little yellow pill with a Vee cut into it.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Something to relax you and make you feel good,” she said.

I swallowed, blew my nose, and decided I did feel better. Good enough, in fact, to study for my economics final the next day, for which I hadn’t cracked a book.

Sandy woke me in the morning, my face on top of my economics notes. I felt woozy from the pill so she helped me down to the snack bar for black coffee, lots of it, before sending me off to my exam. Afterward, I went back to the room and slept until Sandy got up me for dinner. I said I wasn’t hungry, but she insisted on taking me to the dining room. I gagged on the Salisbury steak, but got down some mashed potatoes and a spoonful of boiled peas.

“I can’t believe one Valium affected you this way,” she said.

Friday morning, still fuzzy-headed, I found a note from Reza in my mailbox.

“Meet me at the theater at 7:00. I have news.” That cleared my brain. Reza was back and he wanted me.

He was at the stage door when I arrived. The anxiety I had lived with all those days—the questions, doubts, fears—dropped away and I hugged him right there in the open.

“Not here, Chérie,” he said, holding me away.

I tried to hug him again inside the theater, but he put me off. “We have to talk,” he said.

“I know,” I said, moving toward the mattress.

“Not there,” Reza said, leading me into a dressing room. He sat me down in a chair while he stood facing the mirror, his reflection talking to me. “My grandfather was in New York. He called seven o’clock Wednesday morning and *commanded* that I appear at his hotel *immediately*.” Reza’s right hand curled into a fist and began, thumbside, to beat against his thigh. “After I got there, he ignored me. I sat around all day waiting to find out what the old man wanted. I couldn’t even have a cigarette because I’m not supposed to smoke. The bastard didn’t even acknowledge my presence until dinnertime. Then I had to eat my way through four courses before he got to the point over dessert.” Reza’s lips compressed, his eyes narrowed, the fist became still, and he turned to face me. “He has arranged a marriage for me. I’m to fly to Tehran right after graduation for the ceremony.” He looked beyond me into his future.

I, too, looked and saw her: a pale oval face behind a sheer white veil that fluttered as she breathed; a fragile young girl with large, doelike eyes, which she would lower when someone talked to her because she was, naturally, a virgin. His hands would play on her body the way they played on mine, his tongue explore her secrets, revealing parts of herself she never knew existed. The moans he heard would be hers, not mine. I stood up, knocking the chair over and ran from the room, my vision blurred by tears. I stumbled over something and fell, landing on our lumpy mattress. He landed next to me, talking. I

was sure he was saying the things you say when it's good-bye time: "I'll never forget you"; "We knew it had to end"; "If it were up to me . . ." Words I didn't want to hear so I put my hands over my ears.

Reza pulled the hands away, forcing them behind my back, and pressed me to his body saying, "I-am-not-getting-married," over and over until I finally heard him.

"You're not going to marry her?" I mumbled into his shirt.

"I'm not going to marry anyone." He let go of my hands and tried to raise my head, but I look terrible when I cry—red nose, pink eyes, blotchy skin—so I put my arms around him and hid my face against his neck. He rocked me back and forth, stroking my hair. "Don't cry, Chérie. Everything's going to be all right."

I snuffled and he handed me his handkerchief—a white handkerchief with the letter R, embroidered by his mother in dark blue thread, in the corner. It started me crying again.

"What is it, Chérie?"

"But you'll still leave after graduation."

"No, no I won't. Look." He took out a letter and handed it to me. It said he had been accepted at Columbia University, for graduate work in architecture. "All my life I've done what the family, my grandfather, wanted. Now I have found the courage to do what I want," he said.

During the months I had known him, he had talked endlessly about his dream of becoming an architect. The grandfather knew it, but because they were a merchant family, he, Reza, the only male grandson, had to carry on that tradition. Instead of building cities to house the poor, instead of creating shining buildings of aluminum and glass, filled with air and sunshine—and here his hands, with their long, slim fingers, would sketch the air, creating buildings that reached toward the sky, with windows everywhere to let in the light—he would, instead, sell rugs.

"You're staying?" I asked, wiping my eyes and blowing my nose.

"I'm staying," he said.

I handed him back the handkerchief. "I got your shirt wet."

"I don't care."

"And ruined your tie."

"It doesn't matter." He lifted my head and kissed my mouth. "I love you," he said. He kissed my eyes, "I," my cheeks, "love," my throat, "*you*," and breathed in my ear, "forever."

In that moment I knew it was because of me. He had the courage to stand up to his grandfather and give up his family, his country, everything for me, because he really and truly loved me.

I wrapped my arms around him and lay back on the mattress, taking him with me, feeling the warmth of his weight on me. We stayed that way until I began to quiver with wanting him. I undid his shirt and kissed his chest and said I loved him, and he said my name like a sigh of relief—a sigh that said the only thing that mattered was the two of us together making love.

In-between our lovemaking, Reza and I made plans for the future. While at Columbia, Reza would live with his roommate, Manny, in the Upper Westside apartment Manny's family owned. The Auerbachs, wealthy Dutch Jews who were in the wholesale diamond business, kept the apartment for Mr. Auerbach's business trips to New York. I

would get a job and an apartment. Reza would be with me weekends until he finished school. After that, we'd live together and stay lovers forever. Maybe, someday, get married. Anything was possible. Anything.

Read the complete story in *Irons in the Fire*

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