

**Mehdi Okasi**  
**From *May This Be Your Last Sorrow***

While my mother saved me from fighting in one war, I've witnessed many others from the safety of America's east coast: The Gulf War, Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan, and in the summer of 1995, when my mother and I finally returned to Iran for the first time in twelve years, thousands of Muslims were being slaughtered in Bosnia. My teenage years were marked by primetime broadcasts of smoldering buildings, men wielding Kalashnikovs, tanks hunkering down narrow streets, bodies bloodying sidewalks, robin blue UN helmets, and children, many children, lost or orphaned or abandoned, staring saucer-wide into the lens of a camera. "I would never have let you become a soldier," my mother said to me in those years, recalling how we'd fled the eight-year war with Iraq. "They don't know the meaning of being a son." But those years of global violence were only a distant landscape, one that I could switch off with a remote. Living in a suburb of Boston, my life was otherwise occupied with college. And while it was a time of great sorrow, I didn't feel it as such until we returned to Iran that June, and I saw two boys hang.

"So much will have changed," my mother mourned on the plane. Six years after we immigrated to Watertown, Massachusetts my grandmother died. I found my mother after school, kneeling in the kitchen, her hands moving about her head as if she were dropping fistfuls of dirt over her body. She'd pulled her hair into a tangled nest. Bite marks covered her hands. I tried to touch her but she screamed. I didn't know that when my mother mourned, she did so loudly and did not want to be touched. Earlier that week she'd dreamed her second molar fell out. When she woke up, she knew someone had died. The call came three days later. In the kitchen, she made me kneel and face her. You hold the tooth in your mouth—she said to me, describing her dream—because it is part of you. You cradle it with your tongue. Lick its jagged roots. It knocks against

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your other teeth. You feel the bloody gap where it once belonged like a haunting in your mouth. Still your tongue tries to make it fit, to put it back. This is sorrow, she said to me. To hold onto a thing that stops being itself.

On the plane, she imagined how entire neighborhoods in Tehran would have changed, sweet boys she'd once known disappeared. Somewhere over central Europe she prescribed I massage her feet. "My doctor," she said, trying to kiss my hands. I knew to pull them away before she could, to grab her hands instead and bring them to my lips because she was the mother and I the son. I kneeled in the cramped aisle and untied her sneakers, pulled off her white socks. Neighboring men looked away while their women smiled at me. The heels of her feet were rough and chalky; I ran my fingers between her toes and flicked away bits of lint. On my own hands, I smelled the warm metal tang of palmed coins.

In line to have our passports inspected, my mother's mouth went dry and spittle flecked the corners. "Don't look them in the eyes," she whispered, her gaze steely. Standing in the middle of the glass walled terminal, donned in a black headscarf and raincoat, she looked like a grand piece of Victorian furniture draped against the effects of sun and dust. "Tell them nothing more than what I told you." She handed me my Iranian passport. I was surprised to see myself as a child wearing overalls, my hair parted to one side, shades lighter than I am now.

"What is your business in Iran?" the shaggy-browed agent asked.

"Holiday," I said. Then added, "and family." Which, of course, was not the whole truth.

By the time we were stamped into the country, retrieved our four overweight suitcases and had them inspected for contraband, it was after three in the morning. As we neared the glass divide, my mother searched the crowd for family and instructed me to do the same even though I didn't know their faces. Before I could remind her, they spotted and pulled us to them. Once free from

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their embraces, I resisted the urge to wipe my cheeks and instead, watched the televisions mounted overhead where a group of bearded men were leading the handcuffed boys from a courtroom.

“What happened?” I asked my cousin, Babak, pointing to the television above. He looked at the screen and then at me, before his gaze shifted to solitary men standing sentry throughout the terminal.

“Not here,” Babak said, and then pushed a cart saddled with two of our suitcases towards the exit. I looked at the bouquet of lilies that had somehow ended up in my arms and followed. Outside, I looked away when my mother fell to her knees and kissed the ground. The temperature was comfortable and I said as much. “Wait till the sun comes up,” Babak said. “You’re going to be so dark.”

We drove to my uncle’s apartment in a caravan of five cars. Before we could go inside, three men brought a sheep forth and held it down over the threshold into the courtyard. The sheep’s front and back legs were tied so that it couldn’t stand, but nevertheless it struggled to right itself. It was the first time I’d ever seen a sheep up close, and its wool was not white, as I’d imagined. It smelled of s\*\*\* and wet earth. My uncle was the one to draw a hose from inside the courtyard. He gave the sheep a drink and said a prayer. The water seemed to surprise the sheep whose eyes rolled back in its head as if trying to look behind him, where, I suspected, he’d identified the source of impending danger. Some of the water ran into its nose and the sheep convulsed, trying desperately to stand and failing. The men collared it, and the sheep’s desperate bleating made me jump. The men strengthened their hold and the sheep stopped struggling. My uncle pulled out a knife and slit its throat. The blood spilled dark and black, pooled at our feet, then streamed across the threshold and over the sidewalk in a neat dark river, waterfalling into the *joub* that lined both sides of the street, washing away trash and debris. The sheep continued to kick with its roped legs as it bled out, twitched, and finally died. I followed my mother and stepped over the stream of blood and into the

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courtyard, noticing how the sheep's eyes clouded like muddled sediment. "They give most of the meat to the poor," my mother said as we made our way inside, "a sacrifice for our safe return." As if I should understand the meaning. As if sacrifice, like flowers or balloons, were the welcomed trappings of any reunion.