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THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE GREENGAGE TREE

TRANSLATED FROM THE PERSIAN

An abridged version of this chapter is discussed in our Open Book Unbound podcast 19

Beeta says that Mom attained enlightenment at exactly 2:35 P.M. on August 18, 1988, atop the grove's tallest greengage plum tree on a hill overlooking all fifty-three village houses, to the sound of the scrubbing of pots and pans, a ruckus that pulled the grove out of its lethargy every afternoon. At that very moment, blindfolded and hands tied behind his back, Sohrab was hanged. He was hanged without trial, and unaware he would be buried en masse with hundreds of other political prisoners early the next morning in a long pit in the deserts south of Tehran, without any indication or marker lest a relative come years later and tap a pebble on a headstone and murmur *there is no god but God.*[1]

Beeta says Mom came down from the tallest greengage tree and, without looking at Beeta who was filling her skirt with sour greengages, walked towards the forest saying, "This whole thing is not at all as I'd thought." Beeta wanted Mom to explain, but Mom, as though mesmerized like someone with forest fever—what I call *forest melancholia*—walked with a steady step and hollow gaze into the forest to climb up the tallest oak where she sat on its highest bough for three days and three nights in the sun, rain, moonlight, and fog, looking with bewilderment at the life she was seeing for the first time.

Just as Mom reached the highest branch, perched to view her own life, the complex lives of family both distant and near, the events of that big five-bedroom house in that five-hectare grove, Razan, Tehran, Iran, and then suddenly the whole planet and universe, Beeta ran to the house and announced that though still harboring a mania for fireflies, Mom also now had a mania for heights!

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[1] In Iranian culture it is common to tap a small stone against the headstone and say "there is no god but God." The tapping is to wake the spirit of the dead to hear the recital of this phrase.

At first none of us took her new infatuation seriously, but when midnight had come and gone and there was still no sign of her, first I, then Dad, then Beeta carrying a lantern, went and sat down under the tree. We lit a fire upon which we placed a zinc kettle so the fragrance of our smoked tea would fill the Jurassic-age Hyrcanian forest—the last of its kind—and lure Mom down. The fragrance of the northern-smoked tea reached Mom's nostrils as she was traversing the Milky Way, watching the stars and planets spinning and orbiting with astonishing order, every rotation of which split open a space in which scientists hopelessly searched for a sign of God. From up there, perched on star dust, gazing down at an Earth no bigger than a tiny speck, she came to the same conclusion she had reached that day at precisely 2:35 P.M.: it's not worth it, life isn't what she had thought. Life is precisely that which she and others were prodigiously killing—the moment itself. A moment carrying in its womb the past and future; just like lines on the palm of one's hand, in the leaf of a tree, or in her husband, Hushang's eyes.

Around five o'clock the next morning, Dad, Beeta, and I woke up in the thick morning fog to see the last foxes returning to their dens after hunting Razan's chickens and roosters, and to feel the wings of the hoopoe just inches away. Mom had once again returned to the highest bough from her peregrination among the planets and cities, villages, islands, and tribes, in time to hear the song of thousands and thousands of sparrows, and to see a hedgehog curl up and roll down the forest slope because Dad had moved. We all took our places at the same time; us around the fire, Mom up in the tree, Sohrab in the pit alongside hundreds of other corpses. After all, the executioners were so overwhelmed, they had been unable to bury the bodies in time as planned. But the first killed were the lucky ones. In the following days, the number of people executed increased so much that corpses piled high in the prison back yard and began to stink, and Evin's ants, flies, crows, and cats, who hadn't had such a feast since the prison was built, licked, sucked and picked at them greedily. Juvenile political prisoners had the good fortune to be pardoned by the Imam if they fired the final shot that would put the condemned out of their misery. With bruised faces, trembling hands, and pants soaked with urine, hundreds of thirteen- and fourteen-year- olds, whose only crime had been participating in a party meeing, reading banned pamphlets, or distributing flyers in the street, fired the last shot into faces that were sometimes still watching them with twitching pupils.

It was mayhem, and the executioners were so overwhelmed by the stench of loathsome death that filled the hall that they would go sporadically mad and be transferred directly to a military asylum, only to vanish or be killed months later. From July 29, 1988, when the first series of executions of the People's Mojahedin and communist prisoners began, until mid September of the same year when more than five thousand people in Tehran, Karaj, and other cities were hanged or shot by firing squad, only three provincial soldiers disobeyed firing orders. Their bodies, along with those executed, became eternal hosts to three lead bullets. Midway through the second month, of the dozens of refrigerated-semi drivers, whose job had been to haul bodies to the remote desert outside the city, four also ended up in the asylum. The stench of putrefied bodies had so clogged their nostrils, they thought it emanated from them wherever they went, and gave them away. They suspected their wives could smell it, too, but didn't let on, out of pity or fear. They were frightened of the apprehensive looks they received when standing in the long line for food ration coupons, bread, or pasteurized milk. One of them thought the black crows gathering in ever greater numbers around the corpse-filled trenches were stalking him. He thought the stench of his own body had brought the crows to break him: now sitting on house walls, perched on the power poles, and flying above the city. In the smaller cities, two members of a firing squad, whose job had been to execute political prisoners in the desert outside the city, were shot in the back as they ran away from their duties. Meanwhile, due to their "excellence in carrying out duties," hundreds of executioners and putrefied-corpse transporters were promoted to become Revolutionary Guards, interrogators, mayors, retribution executors, and prison wardens.

When Dad called out with his cheery morning voice that it was time for tea with *kondak* bread, he was sure Mom wasn't going to forget her latest craze. That's why he added hastily, "If there is one thing we inherited from our forefathers it's this mania; a mania for new things. For impossible things." Then gradually the morning fog got thicker and thicker, blurring out the three of us, with our lantern, fire and teakettle; and allowing Mom another opportunity to travel through a world that contained a planet which, despite all its vastness and countries and religions and books and wars and revolutions and executions and births and this oak tree, she had just realized was nothing but a minuscule speck in the universe.

At the age of forty-four, Mom suddenly became old. Her hair turned grey and Beeta, who was the first one in the house to see her in three days, yelled, “An old woman just arrived!” When Dad and I ran to see her, Mom had positioned herself on the living-room couch and was filing her left thumbnail with mysterious calm.

Mom’s three-day enlightenment in the tree suddenly gave me an idea. Mom had just begun filing her right thumbnail when I gathered all my books from the bookcase. Smiling at all of them, I told them that if something went missing from the house, to know it was I who had taken it. Then, to an astonished look from Beeta, Mom’s otherworldly stare, and Dad’s usual smirk, without a backward glance, I went to Dad’s workroom and grabbed what I needed: a hammer, nails, saw, and twine. It took five days to build my treehouse the way I wanted, that is, where it couldn’t be seen, at the highest point of the tallest oak tree in the forest—the same tree that, until an hour ago, was the site of Mom’s ascension. It had a window facing the sunrise and a door facing its setting, with a small balcony facing the house, and a rope railing. A big tarp covered the roof and all the branches, so that on rainy days and nights it would produce the same sound I had loved all thirteen years of my life; a tarp that every summer, prior to Sohrab’s arrest, was spread out over the wooden shelves and cellar floor for silkworm production. There the worms spent a full two weeks eating mulberry leaves till, dreaming of butterflies, they spun their cocoons and then, unbeknownst to them, were drowned and boiled in a big vat. From their cocoons, white silk threads would be spun that only some of the wealthy carpet sellers in the cities of Isfahan, Nain and Kashan could afford.They gave this silk thread to destitute carpet weavers who couldn’t leave their dank basements for even a minute during the day to greet the sun. They only knew one thing: how to weave silkworm dreams.

Sitting on the green sofa across from Mom and looking at her absently filing her nail, Dad thought that although he, a skilled *tar* player, was the source of the family’s silkworm production and indisputable heir of the ability to interact with supernatural creatures, he had never been fortunate enough to see Mom in flight.

When Dad saw Mom for the first time heading down to Darband Park, she was barely seventeen and in the throes of an impossible love; a love that, for the first and last time, allowed her to soar over Naser Khosrow Street, over passersby and second-hand booksellers. Just six months before meeting Dad, she had had another, significantly more exhilarating, encounter, but one without a future. It was so exhilarating that from then on, and for the rest of her life, she heaved sighs like no other. They were long and deep and as concealed as possible, but not to the extent that in all those years, Dad hadn't noticed. At twenty-five, Dad fell so intensely in love with Mom—Roza—and at first sight, that at the end of that very same day, a night among Darband's foggy nights, he married her, in a daze and in the presence of a passing mullah who, fearful of dark specters and fog, was muttering prayers as he rushed, oil lamp in hand, down the slope. Having received his twenty tomans and a tip, the mullah didn't even linger long enough to behold the young couple's passionate first kiss. Dad placed a dogwood berry in Mom's mouth and said, "Let's go and introduce you to my family."

Despite all of Mom and Dad's strange qualities, my favorite family member is my father's little brother, Khosrow. As I was building my treehouse I recalled that he was able to turn any task into a mystical ritual. The second of three children, each born three years apart, he had proven himself to be the most befitting heir to the family mania. He spent a year in prison under Mohammad Reza Shah, two years under Khomeini; married, divorced; spent three years in self-imposed exile at home to study seventy-nine volumes of Indian and East Asian mysticism and learn Sanskrit. After spending three days and nights lying in an empty grave in a Tibetan cemetery reading the Vedas, he levitated one meter above the ground while practicing Osho meditation; he lived for a month in a wooden boat in the middle of a Siberian lake, as instructed by a shaman.

While weaving a branch in and out of the others to form a wall for my treehouse and thinking about Uncle Khosrow's craziness, I was overcome by a moment of despair—there was nothing new and different left in the world for me to do. We had to wait for Uncle Khosrow because in any case it was he who was the most likely to understand Mom. He was an experienced searcher, the exact opposite of me and us. We were just beginning.

As I was building my treehouse and thinking about all Uncle Khosrow had done, and Mom's unexpected enlightenment and ascension atop the greengage and oak trees, a surprise summer rain began to fall that continued for three days and nights. It would have turned me into a scaly, reptilian creature that feeds on algae, rotten fruit, and moss if Beeta, like a fallen angel with her orange umbrella and pleated sky-blue skirt, hadn't appeared to take me back into the house. At sunset on the fifth day, in the silence of the grove and awaiting the arrival of Uncle Khosrow, or news of Sohrab, my treehouse was completed.

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