

NAHID RACHLIN

Healing

Mehdi sat in the Hafez Hotel's garden restaurant, having breakfast and rereading the adoption document. Persian music, santur, tar, and flute, came from a radio inside. How quickly his world had fallen apart. It was less than a year ago when he lost both parents in a fatal car accident—a drunk driver hit their car when they were just beginning a cross-country trip—not yet out of Boston. They had moved to Boston, from Austin, to be near him when he would start medical school there. They had both retired and then downsized their daily expenses, so that they could finally travel as much as they wanted to. The year before they had spent six months traveling in Europe; now they were about to cover parts of the US, where they had never been. Still, in shock and grief from the sudden loss of his parents, he discovered he had been adopted. He was sorting through their papers, when he came upon it. The document was written in Farsi, followed by an English translation.

Mehdi, born in Tehran on June 25, 1977, was petitioned by Susan Smith, an American-Christian, and her husband Abdolab Motaveli, an Iranian-Muslim, to be their lawful child... The infant was residing in the Sobh Orphanage in Saveh since he was found on its steps by an employee. The letter pinned to his overalls, said only that his name was Mehdi (no last name given). There was no mention of the birth father. The adoptive parents, agree they will raise Mehdi in the Muslim religion.

Mehdi pondered the fact that contrary to their evident promise to the orphanage authorities, his parents had not raised him in the Muslim religion, nor in any religion. They did celebrate Christmas and Norooz, the national Iranian holiday, because, as they explained, they liked the rituals. They probably had to make that promise to the orphanage to be able to adopt him. But what had shaken him up was their keeping from him the fact that he was adopted. How can you hide something so important from your child? In retrospect there had been uneasy moments when he came into the room where his parents were talking and they suddenly became silent. Once he had come into the room and heard one sentence. "It will only upset him." He had asked what they were talking about. "Something about your father's work," his mother said and jumped into another subject.

Along with the document, he had come across his mother's diary. It was old and its red cover was faded. The entries were brief and far apart. Most of them were about people she interacted with at Mass General Hospital where she worked as a social worker. But one stood out, penetrated him. He took out the page he had torn out of the diary and put it with the adoption document.

We were told from the start that adoption from Iran would be close to impossible, but driven by our conviction we traveled there to explore the idea ourselves. I remember clearly when we first walked into the Sobbeh orphanage. We were not welcomed. It took two weeks before the staff warmed up to us and opened their hearts and minds to the idea of us adopting a child. Their resistance to it befuddles me. They hardly have adequate funds for the children... and what's their future living in an orphanage all their lives? They do allow some carefully selected Iranian families to adopt them, but they are so careful that many just remain in the orphanage. When we finally held Mehdi in our arms ready to come home. The director said never to forget Mehdi's friends, all the other children that had to be left behind. I try every day to remember them all.

His parents had met in Austin, where his father was studying to be an engineer school and his mother was getting a degree in social work. They had gone to Iran for family visits; it must have been on one of those trips that they adopted him.

He put the document and the page back in their envelope and then into his knapsack and left to go to his aunt Afsaneh's house. He had found her phone number and address in his father's address book. He wasn't even sure if his aunt knew the whereabouts of the orphanage or even about the adoption. Still he could

ask her questions. Paradoxically missing his adoptive mother led him to want to know more about his biological mother. How desperate she must have been to give up her son, boys being so valued in the Iranian culture.

It had taken a year for him to obtain a visa to come to Iran. The clerk at the Pakistani Embassy, the go-between for Iran and America, had asked him to send him a copy of the adoption document. The proof that he was born in Iran would automatically make him an Iranian citizen, while he could maintain his American citizenship. As it turned out this was a good time for him to come; he had just ended his summer job and had three weeks before his medical school classes would begin. It had also given him the chance to take a Farsi course, to build on what he had learned at home when his parents occasionally spoke the language.

He knew the location of the orphanage but had not been able to find their phone number. Perhaps they changed their name or maybe it no longer existed. So much had changed in Iran after he was born. There had been a revolution, when the Shah was toppled and the Islamic regime took over, and then the eight-year war with Iraq. A few years after the war ended it became possible for his parents to take him to Iran for a whole summer's visit. They stayed in three rooms in his aunt's house. The rooms stood on one side of the courtyard; his aunt lived with her daughter in a row of rooms on the other side.

On that visit, the mood in Iran was a mixture of relief and grief. He caught the darkness wherever his parents took him; people talked about losing family members and friends, their homes. He remembered how, in his immaturity, had said to his parents, "It's like a funeral home here." The only aspect of the visit that he had liked was the flirtation he developed with his cousin, Latifeh, Aunt Afsaneh's daughter. "You're so American!" She said to him, meaning it as a compliment.

His hotel wasn't too far from where his aunt Afsaneh lived and he decided to walk there, to see more of the city. Streets were bustling with people going about their tasks, vendors hawking their merchandise. Cars, motorbikes, bicycles, trucks and buses honked their horns at each other. He passed a mosque, a *Karvansaray*, carpet shops, then entered a square where a magician was performing. People were gathered around him. The magician held a bird in his hand and then as he opened his palm it was no longer there. Instead it chirped in a box several feet away from him. Children were laughing in amazement.

Aunt Afsaneh's house stood on an alley with a public bath for men at its beginning and men were going in and coming out of it. A young boy was carrying a tray with several glasses of tea on it. A few boys were playing soccer on the street

and they stared at him, this stranger in their alley. He knocked and Aunt Afsaneh herself opened the door promptly.

"It's me, Mehdi," he said.

"How wonderful to see you," she said. "Grown, and so handsome."

He entered the hallway and they embraced. She led him into the courtyard, filled with fruit trees, and then a room furnished with several rugs spread on the floor, cushions to lean against. The rugs, with designs of birds, flowers, trees, gave warmth and texture to the room. So did all the family photographs on the mantle. He paused by the photographs. One was of him standing between his parents, under the plum tree in the courtyard. His parents were smiling but he looked serious, old for his age of fourteen then.

"My dear, dear brother. I didn't see enough of him..." Aunt Afsaneh said as they sat on the rug, leaning against cushions. She was plump; gray was strewn through her dark hair. Unlike his father she was an observant Muslim. But an aunt was allowed to go uncovered in front of a nephew. Tears came into her eyes. "I couldn't get to America, even for the funeral, impossible to get a visa.... This terrible break between Iran and America. At least they had all those good years together."

"Yes," he said, thinking of the spark of love for each other his parents projected. They talked about world politics, exchanged impressions of books, people, with ease and understanding of each other's point of view.

There was a knock on the outside door. "People are coming to see you," Aunt Afsaneh said and left to open the door.

She came back accompanied with Latifeh and her husband, and their two children, a boy and a girl. Mehdi gave a start seeing Latifeh; his aunt hadn't said she was coming.

"It's so wonderful you're here," Latifeh said in an unselfconscious way and introduced him to her husband and children. As they all sat down, Latifeh took off her scarf and *rupush* and fluffed up her long, wavy brown hair, violating the Muslim rule to cover up in front of a cousin. Haydar, her husband, asked Mehdi one question after another about America. The children kept getting up, going out into the courtyard and coming back again.

"I'm so sorry about your mother, and father," Latifeh said in English, the language they used when he had been visiting years ago. She was learning English so that she could work in a travel agency, she had told him.

"It's worse than losing them to an illness. I wasn't prepared for it," he said.

As Latifeh's husband left the room to attend to the children and Aunt Afsaneh went into the kitchen, they began to reminisce about that last visit.

“Remember once we were sitting on a rock by the stream. I said to you when we’re a little older you should marry me and take me to live in America. I was really forward,” she whispered and laughed.

Indeed he remembered that day very well. He had said, “I wish I could marry you but we’re cousins.”

“Cousins marry each other in Iran every day. People trust family members more than anyone else.”

He had taken her in his arms and kissed her. Her breasts were budding and his own voice was beginning to change. He was only three inches taller than her, and already wore glasses. He was self-conscious about his appearance but she had put him at ease by complimenting him, telling him the glasses made him seem very intelligent.

Other relatives began to arrive, interrupting their conversation. His cousin Nasser was among them. Nasser used to flirt with Latifeh too, Mehdi remembered, but she didn’t respond to him.

“We’ve been so excited that you’re visiting,” Nasser said and introduced his wife, a vivacious woman with dimples on her cheeks, displaying her long dark hair—she had immediately taken off her scarf and *rupush*, also not bound by religion. Then Nasser began to fill Mehdi in about himself and other relatives who lived in different parts of Iran.

Latifeh got up and helped her mother spread a cloth and put platters of food on it—lamb and chicken kebabs, yogurt soup, saffron rice, a bubbly yogurt drink. The air became fragrant with spices. When he was in high school and living at home he used to refuse to eat the Iranian meals his mother occasionally made. Instead he went out and bought himself fast food. Now, the fragrance of these spices was pleasing to him.

Lunch took a long time. It was four o’clock when the relatives finally started to leave. As they were saying good-bye, everyone invited Mehdi to come and stay with them in their houses or apartments. They said he must be lonely in a hotel room. Mehdi told them what he had told his aunt when she had invited him to stay with her, that he had led a solitary life as a student and was used to being alone.

After everyone left, he turned to his aunt, trying to get himself to ask her about the adoption.

“Aunt Afsaneh, I found out something... it shook me up,” he said.

She looked at him with anticipation.

“I was adopted from an orphanage in Saveh. My parents never told me.”

"I know, they decided to keep it from you," she said after a pause. "They thought you'd feel bad. They intended to tell you when you were older, about to get married."

He felt a clutch at his heart, thinking yes, I was put on the steps of the orphanage by my irresponsible, or desperate, mother.

"Does everyone in the family know?" he asked.

"No, dear, I'm the only one they told. I actually went to the orphanage with them once before we took you out. The process took a few months."

"Did my parents ever find out who my biological mother is?"

Aunt Afsaneh shook her head.

"I wasn't able to find a phone number for the orphanage. Is it still there?"

"I think so. It's name might have changed. A bus goes to Saveh. It takes about two hours, though it should only take an hour. The roads haven't been repaired since they were damaged during the war. When you get there anyone could tell you where the orphanage is."

They talked a little while longer, mainly his aunt bringing up memories of her brother, their closeness when they were children, how they had taken different paths in life with her remaining in Iran and he going to the US. "When he left for college his goal was to return and put his education into practice here." She sighed. "But that never happened."

The muezzin's call to evening prayer reached them. He got up.

"Come back after you return from the orphanage. Tell me what you found."

He got directions to the bus station and left. In front of the bus station, peddlers were competing for attention. "Winston cigarettes that you can't find anywhere else," "the sweetest, reddest watermelon," "prices you can't match."

A tour bus was about to leave for Saveh. He bought a ticket for that, since the regular buses weren't coming. He picked up a map from the ticket counter and got onto the bus. He sat by a window and looked out. They passed a plain with areas of arid land that in different spots was irrigated, clusters of mud and straw houses, a mosque. He recalled going to a mosque in Tehran with his father on that visit long ago. He had been dazzled by the myriad of mirrors covering its interior walls. He wondered if at one time his father had believed in his religion, if his agnosticism was a compromise with his mother who also stopped going to church. Did his father ever regret marrying an American woman and remained in America rather than returning home as he had once intended? Did he miss home, more than he admitted?

The bus stopped in Varamin; some passengers got out and new ones got in. He had kept a Varamin rug from his parents' belongings and had given the rest of

the furniture to an auction house. Keeping the rug was his first step in trying to connect to his father's heritage. As a teenager he hadn't wanted a Persian rug in his room. Instead he had a thick blue rug. The Varamin rug now brightened and gave character to his student apartment. The rug was dark red on dark blue with a geometric pattern and repeated medallions.

A young girl, wearing a head scarf and *rupush* boarded the bus and sat next to him. On this tour bus men and women weren't segregated as they were on regular buses. "Are you American?" she asked him in English,

"Yes, how did you know?"

"Just something about you."

She reminded him of Latifeh, with her straightforward manner, even resembling her a little in her looks—slender figure, large brown eyes, so clear that it was as if you could see her soul through them.

"I work in the airport, I meet people from all over the world," she added. "Is this your first time in Iran? It isn't easy for Americans to get visas these days."

"I'm a dual citizen, with an Iranian passport, and an American one. I was born here."

"An American passport can get you in trouble here sometimes. If the passport checker wants to be mean, he might enforce the law against dual citizenship. I know it's not illegal in America." She asked him more questions, full of curiosity about him.

He felt at ease with her and so he told her about his parents, the adoption, everything.

"I'm visiting my grandmother. I'm afraid this may be the last time I'll see her," she said. "She's very old, ninety-two, and has heart problems." She suddenly got up. "I almost missed my stop." She took out a card from her pocketbook and gave it to him. "Look me up in Tehran." Then she rushed out of the bus.

He looked at the card. Her name was Sorraya Partovi. He put the card in his wallet, thinking who knows maybe I will seek her out.

They entered the center of Saveh and the driver announced this was the last stop. Mehdi asked him if he knew where the orphanage was. He said it was about ten blocks from there and told him how to get there.

On the way to the address Mehdi passed a pomegranate orchard, a wheat field, an avenue lined with shops, old houses. Paykan cars with old exhausts rattled by.

He entered a narrow street and then he stood in front of the orphanage. His heart beat with a strange apprehension as he looked at the old rambling building

with its brick walls, sooty and chipping in parts. It had no name but the number was right.

A flat, cement step led up to the large wooden door. It must have been on that step my birth mother had put me, maybe in its corner so that no one would tread on me. The idea, so unbelievable still, again sent ripples of shock and sadness through him. On one side of the orphanage stood a dingy old apartment building, on the other side an empty lot.

He could hear a hum of children talking, footsteps, inside. He knocked on the door and waited. A woman, wearing a *chador* opened the door.

“Can I talk to the director?” He hesitated, then said. “I was adopted from here.”

The woman stared at him. “We aren’t supposed to let people in.”

“I came to Iran all the way from America, hoping to see this place and find out something about my biological mother.” He took out the document from his knapsack and gave it to the woman.

The woman glanced through the document. “Come in,” she said.

They went through a dim hallway and entered a courtyard. Cypress trees stood in a row against a wall. Swings, a sandbox, occupied a corner and children were playing in them. Two little boys were sitting in wheelchairs, watching. Through an open door to a large room he saw children engaged in various task—seating, weaving, painting. A few babies were sleeping in cribs. He was chilled, thinking he had been once lying in a crib there too.

The woman took him into a room, unadorned except for a plant, full of blossoms, on a desk. She told him her name was Shirin and she had worked there for five years as the assistant to the director, overseeing the children’s affairs. She began to pour out about how desperate for money they were for a long time and now some philanthropists were helping them out with clothes, supplies, food for the children, repairs when needed. “We’re supposed to be paid by the health and welfare organization, but they don’t give us a penny. The only money we get comes from ordinary people. Recently a rich bazaari paid for repairs in the building. He also donated most of the children’s clothing, tooth brushes, story books, laundry detergent, soaps, socks for the year.... My work is heartbreaking but rewarding too. We take good care of the children.”

“I read in my mother’s diary that adoption from Iran is very difficult.”

“It used to be that way. But now we’re open to it. So many children became orphans with the Bam earthquake, and many parents abandon their children out of dire poverty. Then there are many unwed mothers, abandoned by the men who

make them pregnant and then disappear. Boys are adopted quickly but girls too eventually find a home. No one adopts the disabled children.”

“Can you tell me anything about her... my biological mother. Did she ever make her real identity known?”

“We have no records of anyone from so many years ago. Part of the orphanage was damaged by a missile during the war and all the old records were destroyed. So even if she had come forward we don’t have any records.”

“I wish there was a way I could track her down.”

“I know the urge. Many grown children come here with that hope.”

Shirin looked attractive now that she had let her *chador* slip over her shoulders. It seemed to him many women followed the rules only when they had to and let go of them when they could get away with it. His biological mother might have broken rules but it had been too large and she had to pay a price for it.

He lingered there for a while, hoping somehow more information about his mother would pop out but nothing. He finally got up to leave.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t much help,” Shirin said as she saw him to the door.

“I feel better just having talked to you.”

Outside, as he walked back to the bus station, he was riveted on every woman who looked to be the age his mother would be now. She could be alive and living in this neighborhood. But maybe she had come there only to put her baby in front of the orphanage. In one spot he was actually tempted to stop a woman whose eyes were like his own, deep brown with specks of gray and thick lashes. But the woman looked at him nonchalantly and walked on.

It was dark by the time he got on a bus. In the hotel he went into the garden restaurant again to have dinner. It was crowded now mainly with families, some foreign, some Iranian. It was a clear night and the sky was filled with bright stars.

He sat there for a long time. After he finished eating he had tea, with pieces of fresh mint floating in it. He sipped it slowly, his mind immersed in all the recent events. The entire year, after his parents’ fatal accident, he had spent most of his time alone. The grief, one shock after another, had distanced him from his friends, his then girlfriend, Cindy. Every night he came to his apartment at night and studied and then played music until he fell asleep. But in spite of the regularity of his days, the discipline he imposed on himself, and the map he had drawn for his future, he always had an unsettling feeling of somehow being lost. It was as if he were in a dark maze of streets not knowing what turn to take. It seemed life was full of decisions with unpredictable outcomes. His parents would still be alive if they hadn’t taken that particular route, where the drunk driver came their way. What made them to

come to the orphanage, searching for a child to adopt, at that particular time when I was there? His mind went to what Shirin had told him about the philanthropists who helped the orphanage. When I finish medical school I will come back and work for the orphanage, he thought. His parents had left enough money for him to finish medical school. They would be proud of me, if I put my medical degree to use in this way. I won't change my mind, as my father did about going back home. That won't happen. The resolution sent a ripple of joy through him, brushing away the dark cloud that had surrounded him since he visited the orphanage.

He got up and went to his room. As he lay in bed he was at peace with himself. Then he thought: maybe I'll look up Sorraya, the nice girl on the bus. We would have to go out secretly, as my biological mother most likely had done with the man who got her pregnant and abandoned her. I would be careful not to wrong Sorraya, take responsibility towards her if a relationship develops between us.

Finally he fell asleep and then woke from a dream. In the dream a woman who looked like him and claimed to be his mother was sitting with his adoptive mother in a bare room talking. "I'm his mother," "No, I am," they argued. He fell back asleep, and woke from another dream. Sorraya and his cousin, Latifeh, were sitting in a bare room also and fighting over him. Then all four women and he were hanging on the rays of a huge rainbow and rising together into the sky. He hadn't had a wonderful dream like that since he was a child.



NAHID RACHLIN'S publications include a memoir, *Persian Girls* (Penguin), four novels, *Jumping Over Fire* (City Lights), *Foreigner* (W.W. Norton), *Married to a Stranger* (E.P.Dutton), *The Heart's Desire* (City Lights), and a collection of short stories, *Veils* (City Lights). Her work has been translated into Portuguese, Dutch, Arabic, and Farsi. For more information please visit: <<http://www.nahidrachlin.com>>.