

one of the three Semitic religions—Islam, Christianity, or Judaism—they would assert that the world was created in six days, with Adam coming first, followed by Eve. They might even attempt to reconcile the "Big Bang" theory with biblical accounts. Their minds, preoccupied with their doctrinal teachings, would be resistant to any contrary theories.

Humans are often biased according to their scientific and doctrinal standards. Prejudice is a destructive force that the great religious leaders and guardians of humanity throughout history have sought to avoid. The renowned 13th-century Persian poet Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi offers us important advice on this subject:

“Listen to this reed, how it complains, telling tales of separations.”

-Excerpt from Rumi’s “The Song of the Reed.”

Understanding this verse, we see that Rumi is using the reed as a metaphor for a pure soul. Just as the inner reed is empty, allowing it to lament its separation from its source, we should empty our minds of prejudice to truly hear and understand.

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When our minds are already full of preconceived notions, there is no space for genuine thought or self-reflection. We must be as empty as the reed to hear our own soul’s lament for truth, to learn, and to seek beyond our inherited beliefs.

Before we hear or read anything, we must set aside our prejudices and cleanse our minds and eyes from existing biases to genuinely pursue knowledge and understanding. The author provides this advice to his readers to encourage an open mind and avoid prejudgment while engaging with this book.

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PROLOGUE

The author is neither a Baha’i by choice nor by birth but decided to write this story after learning about the persecution and suffering of his fellow Baha’is in Iran simply for their beliefs. People worldwide endure similar prejudices, a tale as old as time. The author aims to raise awareness and give a voice to all those suffering due to religion, race, color, gender, or any other form of discrimination. One such tale is that of Maryam and her steel-clad soul, who fought against all odds and sought her own form of justice.

In this story, Maryam, the main protagonist, symbolizes the hundreds of Iranian Baha’is, both men and women, who have

endured immense suffering because of their personal beliefs. The story of their suffering was collected from various sources and conversations with Baha'is and is presented here through the experiences of one individual.

Perhaps the most significant message this book offers is the power of unity and solidarity among people, regardless of their country of origin, to overcome the most challenging conditions and solve the most difficult problems.

Maryam, a Baha'i girl, witnesses the deaths and imprisonments of her family, friends, and fellow believers. She is denied education, a fundamental human right, due to her religious minority status. Despite this, she remains a dreamer and passionate learner, looking up to the sky even when faced with hardship, hoping for a better place somewhere on God's earth.

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She faces numerous obstacles, but how can she overcome them in a society where her religion forbids her from taking up arms? Her faith teaches that the pen is mightier than the sword. Not all battles are won with physical strength; sometimes, mental strength is needed to defeat oppressors. Thus, Maryam chooses a path less traveled, relying on her intellect, alliances, dreams, and faith.

Maryam's weapon of choice is her intellect, collaboration with her peers, her dreams, and her faith. She believes that freedom and knowledge are intertwined, and one cannot achieve freedom without proper knowledge. However, in a country where teachers are arrested and executed daily, and students face religious discrimination, how can she succeed?

Will Maryam achieve her dreams, or will her story become another tragic tale of a woman who perished while trying to escape her circumstances? What does the future hold for her?

Read this book to discover whether the tools of intellect, faith, hope, motivation, the pen, knowledge, and patience can make a difference.

No matter the outcome, understand that life is unpredictable, and nothing worth having ever comes easily. True courage is not always about standing at the front line with a weapon in hand; sometimes, it's about bearing the weight of existence each day while everything around you collapses. It's about continuing to live, resist, and believe even when everything seems to push you towards breaking down.

Every day, Maryam had the choice to be someone she wasn't, but she chose to be herself. That, in itself, is courage.

May this book serve as a guide for young people seeking role models for progress or those who feel overwhelmed by life's challenges. There is a hidden force and power within all of us that can lead us to our dreams and goals, regardless of the obstacles.

Remember, the limit of your potential is only the limit of your mind. It may sound like a cliché, but after reading this story inspired by true events, you may come to believe it more deeply than ever.

I hope this book inspires people of all ages because it is never too late to live the life you've always wanted.

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CHAPTER 1: IRAN–THE LAND OF GOLD

There was a calmness in the air of Tehran, the capital city of Iran. It was always like that. For hundreds of years, this city and these mountains saw generations come and go; legacies were created and turned to dust, but the city stayed the same - calm, inviting, and nurturing. In this heavenly setting, there lived a bright, young girl named Maryam with her family.

Maryam's family belonged to the Baha'i religion that originated in Iran. In 1844, the Baha'i belief took on its recent practice in Iran. The faith was announced by a young Iranian named The Báb. Iran is the origin of the three chief figures of the faith: The Bab, Baha-ullah, and Abdul-Bahá.

The Baha'i belief may be Persian in its roots, but not in its teachings, practices, and constituency. It is a worldwide faith that at its center holds and inspires the code of unity and diversity of humanity.

Bahá'u'lláh made daily, secluded prayer a religious obligation for all Baha'is beginning at the age of 15.

Every day, one of three obligatory prayers should be said. It was right after the early morning prayer that

Maryam found out that today is the day she spreads her wings and will learn to fly. Holding on to the hand

of the woman she called mother, Maryam was eagerly strutting down a small but clean street in Tehran.

Maryam was the epitome of innocence, a fresh soul with no worries and all the happiness in her heart.

She was taking her first steps toward a journey which will start a revolution for her community and change the course of history.

Naw-Ruz was just around the corner. Naw-Ruz is the first day of the Baha'i calendar year and one of the eleven holy days for believers of the Baha'i faith. It falls on the vernal equinox, on or near March 21, which is the traditional Iranian New Year. To top the excitement of the festive season, her mother was taking her on her first day at school. Maryam could not be happier.

Smelling like fresh jasmine, her silky dark brunette hair flapped in the wind. She would always set them on her right shoulder. Why wouldn't she? It was a special day! Whenever she felt like being the most presentable and beautiful, she would put all her hair on her right shoulder and greet people with warm hearts. It was a childish but wholesome ritual that she had come up with.

She used to stand in front of the mirror caressing her hair on her shoulder

while affirming to herself
that she is beautiful and loved. Nothing could dim her shine. No one passed by
her without smiling at her
when they looked at this little flower of a child. Her thoughts were untainted
by the world's opinion or
beauty standards. All she knew was that today is the day when a new world will
open up to her and she
will embrace all it has to offer with an open mind - new people, new friends,
and teachers! She always
wanted to be taught like older girls in the neighborhood. When she saw them
scribbling in their textbooks
and giggling, she could not help but wonder what her own friend's circle will
look like. She endlessly talked
to her mother about when she will be able to go to school, and today the
planets aligned, and her wish
was granted.

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"Slow down, Maryam," said her mother, Simin, who was holding her hand just hard
enough to let her
feel the freedom she could allow. "Having a daughter in Iran is a full-time
job," she said to herself. Simin
was a religious Baha'i woman with fair skin and the soft hands of a mother who
raised her child with all
the love and care she could muster. She was a middle-aged woman with strong
religious beliefs. She led
a modest life with little to no education, as her schooling was done from home
by her mother in a
traditional manner so she could grow up and take care of her household like a
Baha'i woman in Iran was
expected to. And so, she did. She radiated warmth and compassion, which showed
in little Maryam's
manner.

Maryam entered the school premises with her hair in a braid on her right
shoulder, wide-eyed as if she
could hardly believe what she was seeing. Maryam had an innate desire to study
from a young age. Even
when her mother started to teach her at home, she didn't fuss or cry over it
like most kids who just want
to play. Unlike them, Maryam counted the days when she'd start school. The day
was finally here. She
saw kids running around in the little courtyard, which was surrounded by
classes. Girls were playing
hopscotch on the neat grey ground adjacent to a wall that featured artworks by
students and teachers
alike. There was a crooked clock drawing on the far right, probably by someone

Maryam's age. Classes were filled with students who loudly repeated what their teacher taught.

There was a loud chant of counting coming from a class. Maryam listened closely and counted to 10 with them before she realized that there was more than what she had memorized on her fingers. As they walked along the path around the courtyard, she peeked into every class they passed by until her mother stopped at one door and nodded at Maryam to go inside. Little Maryam hesitated for a bit and went inside, followed by Simin.

"Salaam," said a familiar voice from the teacher's desk. Sitting behind the desk, swarmed by what looked like twenty kids, was Azadeh, who was Simin's old friend. She was one of the teachers who were keeping the school running. She genuinely cared about the future of these kids and cared for them as her own.

"Walykum Salam. It's lovely to see you again, Azadeh. How have you been?" Simin replied and gestured for Maryam to greet the teacher. Maryam slowly walked towards the desk and shyly extended her little hand to meet her teacher. Azadeh shook Maryam's hand and took her to a table where a few girls around Maryam's age were sitting with their crayons and coloring books.

"These are your new friends, Maryam. Now you guys take care of Maryam and share your crayons with her until she gets hers tomorrow." All the girls smiled and showed interest in their new classmate. Maryam got along well with everyone in the class even on her first day. But she really liked this one girl named Parvaneh, who was a skinny pale girl with big, dreamy eyes. They instantly got along like they had known each other for a long time. At first sight, they knew they would become best friends. That day, Maryam spent her time getting to know her classmates and their interests, coloring and learning to count at the top of her lungs. They all belonged to different religions, but they did not discriminate between a jay and a sparrow. They all came from different backgrounds, but they bonded over simple things and common

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interests, such as their choice of color for a crayon or whether the apple they were coloring should be red

or green. The small decisions they took together and the unconditional support that came alongside made them the pillars of their newborn friendship.

As Eric Berne said, "The moment a little boy is concerned about which is a jay and which is a sparrow, he can no longer see the birds or hear them sing." Such was the state of Iran at the time. People from different religions (mainly Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam) were living together in harmony. They did not discriminate and were generally happy with their lives, with everyone respecting the other person's beliefs.

The main religion, Ithn' Ashar, or Twelver Shi'ism, was practiced by the vast majority of the population.

The majority of Iranian were Shi'i, unlike the Kurds and Turkmen, who were mostly Sunni Muslims. Along with Baha'is, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Christian groups were spread over the nation.

Under Mohammad Reza Shah, Iran was an absolute monarchy, but he was making quite the changes around here. Iran was acknowledged as the Middle East's Japan or Asia's America because of the level of modernization and industrialization it had in those days. His efforts to create a society where everyone believes in co-existing were noticeable. Mohammad Reza Shah was one of the Iranian monarchs in its 1400 years of monarchy to pay respect to all religious minorities, an act that boosted Iranian religious minorities' self-esteem.

The Shah of Iran always wanted his name to go down in history and to be known as "Cyrus the Great" of his era, as evidenced by his speech during the 2500th anniversary of the founding of the monarchy in Iran. He stood in front of the tomb of Cyrus and, with a voice charged with emotion, said, "Cyrus, sleep well, for we are awake." It is evident here that he wanted to be the Cyrus of his era. The Shah, by giving a lot of reforms to his people, was moving the country in that direction. One of the reasons he threw this "Ultimate party" in 1971 was to let the people of the world know about Iran, so that in addition to oil revenue, he could get revenue from tourism as well. It was also a more promising world for women, and as everyone knows, when things improve for women, they improve for everyone.

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+. The Shah desired an Iran capable of competing with the West. Women were encouraged to attend school, and women and men intermarried freely, with women's educational opportunities greatly expanded.

However, the conditions were not all favorable. In public, you couldn't mention "the King" without saying "his highness, the king of kings, the shadow of a God." Even the most senior generals were expected to greet the King by kissing his hand. You couldn't engage in any meaningful political activity because the only legal party was the king's own party.

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Some would say his reign was tyrannical, but in reality, it was far from it. Mohammad Reza Shah was strict with his people like a father who is sometimes strict about the development of their children. He knew that for the advancement of his country, he needed to be strict. His opponents gave him titles like "dictator" or a "tyrant," but none of them were true. In 1976, when Carter took office and forced him to give more political freedom to the people, it showed that the people were not ready yet and were deceived by religious clergymen. History can tell us what happened to the country then.

Time flies when you are having fun. Maryam didn't even realize when her first day of school came to an end. It was time to say goodbye to her new friends. By the end of the day, Maryam had her own friend group of five little ones like her. Maryam greeted each of her friends with a hug and happily hopped towards her mother who was standing by the door looking at this joyful little angel running towards her.

"Why did it take you so long? I was waiting for you," Maryam said as she pouted. Even though she did have fun at school, she did miss her dearest mother. After all, it was the first time she was away from her mother for so long.

"I know. You must be really hungry. I have Tahdig waiting for you at home," said Simin in a tempting tone.

Maryam's arms were around her mother's neck as soon as the words left her

mouth. Tahdig was her favorite. It is the golden crispy layer at the bottom of the rice pot. It's typically served as a side dish, but there's never enough of it, and it frequently found itself in the middle of most family feuds. Today was special. It was the first time she got to draw, write, learn, and most of all, make friends.

She could not wait to get home and talk to her Baba about her first day at school. Her father was a religious scholar and a well-respected man in all of Tehran. He was very protective of his little angel and always showed her love and care even if Maryam annoyed him with her innocent but complex questions. "Baba, I drew a sun today and colored it bright orange. My friends made a mountain behind where the sun was setting. Can you tell me where the sun goes when it goes behind the mountains? Why does it not get wet when it goes into the sea?" Maryam said while munching and stuffing her mouth with Tahdig.

"Don't talk when you're eating, Maryam. It's a bad manner," her mother told her in a strict but polite tone, and Maryam obliged as her father just smiled and listened to her chatter.

The house was just a few blocks down the busy road from the roofed bazaar. Sometimes Maryam would tag along with her mother to the bazaar. She was not like other kids who would whine and cry at the sight of candies or something that caught her interest. She just liked to look at all the interesting things shop owners were selling. The colors of spices, the weirdly satisfying smells of various soaps, the grand and intricate carpet patterns hanging as they walked down the bazaar, the turquoise crockery with tourists from all over the world swarming over the stalls waiting with cash in their hands; everything was like a big moving picture for her curious eyes.

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She saw all the tourists who looked so different from her. "Where do they come from? Where are they going? I want to see what their home looks like." These thoughts occupied Maryam's mind as she saw these tourists haggle over the prices of their desired items. They could not wait to get their hands on their favorite piece and take a part of Iran with them back home to tell the world what an incredible place it is.

It was like visiting a museum. Every time she would go with her mother, she always came back chewing Gaz and vibrating high. The sugar rush gave her energy, and she would start walking so fast she was almost dragging her mom back home. Gaz was one of the most famous traditional Persian sweets - a chewy sweet made of sugar, egg white, rose water, pistachio, almond, and walnut filling. Much like Gaz, Maryam's life was a sugary poem. Not a worry in the world and open ground for new promises, friends, and a lot of sweetness.

Life was great for Maryam in the city of Tehran. It was like a box of chocolates. Tehran was rich in culture, and the civilization dated back thousands of years. Hundreds of years of people choosing this beautiful fragment of land to spend their lives and leave a legacy behind. Surrounded by snow-clad mountains, on weekends the city got full to the brim with people from all castes, creeds, cultures, and colors coming together to celebrate life. They were Iranians, and they coexisted like the perfect blend of different colors.

Maryam was looking forward to Nowruz. This was the time to breathe in the aroma of garden-fresh flowers that decorated all the households. Everyone was just happy being a part of the celebration. Everyone used to gather in circles to decorate everything with stunning lights and fresh flowers that would make anyone stop and stare. But Maryam's thoughts were set on the feast she would have when her neighbor came back home from the temple that day. She slept making plans with her head on her mother's lap.

"Go to sleep now, Maryam. Before anything, you have to go to school in the morning, and only then can you go to Parvaneh's house for dinner," her mother told her. Maryam nodded in agreement and happily crawled into her bed.

The lights in the room were dim, and out of the window was the big blue sky of Tehran with towering snow-capped mountains. The breeze from these mountains sent a chill down the entire city in winter and kept people safe from the scorching heat of the big ball of fire in summer. Tehran fell from the heavens to the slopes of the Elburz Mountains, more than a thousand meters above sea

level, at the foot of the Alborz Mountain range. This city was alive. It was as old as time itself. So many lives that lived here, so many memories of love and laughter.

The remains from the ancient city of Ray, now Tehran, suggest that settlement in Tehran dates back over 8,000 years. The sands of time had taught the people here how to live together while respecting each other. Not only did they respect each other's beliefs, but they stood side by side with their Iranian brethren in times of happiness, sadness, or catastrophe.

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The country was led by Western-educated, liberal politicians. The country's standing in the world was unquestionably much better. Without disrespect to any people, it is difficult for citizens of a country with years of history that have contributed to human civilization in the arts, literature, and sciences.

To sum it up, under Pahlavi rule, Iran was in a much better position on the international stage. Even though during the Pahlavi Dynasty, people had better lifestyles and more freedom than now, there was a lot of propaganda against Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. For example, in 1963, there was a reform by the Shah called the "White Revolution." In his White Revolution, he proposed "Emancipation of Women" and "Land Reform."

The clergy and mullahs strongly objected to that. Because the proposed "Land Reform" would go against a lot of landowners and bazaar businessmen who supported the clergy. Also, the emancipation of women was against Islamic Shariat. To bring down the Shah's reign, they started accusing the Shah of a lot of things that he had not done. For example, when Takhti, who was a world gold medalist in wrestling, died, they accused SAVAK and the Shah's men of killing him.

Later, it was discovered that he had committed suicide due to family problems he had with his wife.

The Rex Theater in the city of Abadan caught fire, and several people were burned alive; they accused the Shah of doing that too. However, after the revolution, people found out that it was done by the protestors who were against the Shah.

Gradually, the Shah, whose dream was to have Iran one day become like Western countries and one of the 5 prosperous countries of the world, became evil in the eyes of some naive and uneducated people. This instability in a nation's united vision, pumped with the ongoing propaganda, resulted in a revolution. One which crushed many lives.

But for now, Maryam stays blissfully ignorant in her dream world. She could barely sleep that night due to the excitement of what the next day had in store for her. She woke up with shining eyes and stood next to her mother's bed. She leaned in and kissed her mother's forehead before telling her she was ready for her breakfast. Simin woke up rubbing her eyes. It was always bliss looking at her little munchkin. She was the reason Simin felt so full of energy and ready for another day. Just the sight of Maryam, all happy and glowing in the mornings, gave her the energy she needed to start her day.

Maryam gave her the strength to go on another day, and Simin gave Maryam all the protection and pampering in the world so she could live a better life. Simin picked Maryam up and went straight to the kitchen. Maryam ate her breakfast and left the kitchen to get dressed. This was the best part of her day. Maryam loved getting dressed up in fresh clothes and, of course, putting her braid on her right shoulder as the finishing touch. Soon they were out on the street, walking towards her school. As Maryam walked, she could not wait to show her friends what her mother had gifted her for starting school. Maryam entered the class, and her new friend's face gleamed with joy at the sight of her.

They ran to each other and hugged like long-lost friends. They all started chatting about their day, eager to unload all the information. She spent the rest of her day giggling endlessly and showing her new

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crayons off to everyone she met. In a little time, she became the center of attention and affection of her classmates and teachers alike. She was young but intelligent, almost a prodigy. She asked all the right questions and, more than usual, used to baffle her teachers with her vivid and colorful imagination.

"Ms. Azedah? Why can't we see the wind when I can feel it and it makes my feet

cold at night?" asked

Maryam with the same energy she had when school started. Azadeh, who was marking other kids' papers, gazed at the impatient Maryam over her glasses. She put her pen down and said, "Enough questions for one day, but let me just put it this way. All things pure and genuine in life are invisible. You cannot see them, but you feel them immensely. Just like the wind, God, and love."

Maryam's eyes widened as if she had found the meaning of life. The bell rang, and everyone marched out of the class to the playground in search of their parents. Simin was waiting by the school gate and hugged her as soon as she came running.

"Are you excited about your dinner tonight? My baby has grown up into a lady already and is going to her friends tonight, ha?" Simin said while tickling her giggling girl.

Maryam hugged her mom as they walked towards their home, with Maryam asking her mother if they could get some Gaz for Parvaneh to eat after dinner. Minutes passed like hours, and at last, it was time for her dinner at Parvaneh's house. She dressed in a pink dress with a bow on her head, and oh, the hair looked perfect on her right shoulder as always. Simin walked her to Parvaneh's house, which was not more than a block away from their house. Parvaneh's mother, Leila, who was no older than Simin, greeted them with the most genuine smile. "Salam, thanks for coming, please come inside. I have just made tea."

"Thank you so much, but I will be leaving. I need to make dinner and prepare for tomorrow. I will pick her up after dinner time," said Simin. "You don't have to worry about it, sister. I will have her dropped back home when it's bedtime. She's our daughter like Parvaneh." These words came as an affirmation that unconditional love exists in the world, and Simin was more than pleased. She left when Maryam entered the house with Gaz in her hand and a heart full of stories. Her mother treated them with Tahdig, Persian noodle soup (Ash Reshteh), and Maryam's favorite, Persian Kotlet. They ate to their heart's content and told stories lying on the roof of Parvaneh's house, looking at stars until they fell asleep.

The universe watched as these two children talked the night away, unaware that their friendship would

be tested by fire and blood in the name of religion and peace, as the pro-Islamic grip around the Baha'i faith was getting stronger every day. 1

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tehran#:~:text=Archaeological%20remain%20from%20the%20ancient,dates%20back%20over%208%2C000%20years.>

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CHAPTER 2: THE NEW STATE

Even though the Baha'i faith was not recognized as an official religion under the Pahlavi dynasty, it was not regarded as a crime. People who were Baha'is were not executed or hanged by the government. In fact, the Shah's personal physician and doctors were Baha'is.

In the meantime, in Tehran, there were a few guerrillas or terrorists, as the government called them, who carried out operations against the Mohammad Reza Shah government from 1974 until 1977. Such guerrilla operations were happening more frequently during these years. The number of student protests at universities kept growing. Whatever the Shah did, there was always counterproductive propaganda.

For example, higher education became free in all Iranian universities, some of which were comparable to MIT and Stanford University, and students even used to receive some pocket money. Students were also provided with the best medical and dental insurance. The only condition was that students who received such benefits should have worked twice the duration of the benefits received, in the country, whether in the private or public sector.

The Shah wanted to keep academics in the nation to help the country develop. The opposition parties were spreading false rumors that the Shah had planned to utilize educated people as slaves. Other incidents that were accidental or the work of an opposition group were also reported, and SAVAK (the Shah's secret police) and the Shah were held responsible, such as when four hundred people were killed in a fire at the Rex Theatre in the city of Abadan, which was later determined to have been carried out by Khomeini supporters.

As protesters were marching through the streets and chanting "Death to Shah,"

the Islamic Republic of Iran finally came to power in February 1979, and the Shah and his cabinet were overthrown. The Baha'i faith was not recognized as an official religion following the revolution based on the new constitution, and continuing to practice the faith was punishable by death. For Maryam's people, life in Iran became quite challenging. Little Maryam was now forced to live in a society where every Muslim, both young and old, opposed Baha'ism.

"Hey! Give it back," Maryam said. She was furious at what had happened. She was staring at the tall girl with curly hair and a sick grin on her face. This Muslim girl, Amani, was always eyeing Maryam from afar, but this time she crossed all her limits. Amani belonged to a very religious Shi'a family.

She always looked like she felt superior to everyone else at the school. She had never talked to Maryam before, but her eyes always told Maryam that she disliked her. Maryam could see hate in her eyes. This feeling was new, along with other feelings and emotions that she was discovering as she was figuring out and exploring the world around her. Maryam did not know how to respond to it. It was the first time in her life that someone was being mean to her, and she did not even know why.

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She slept on time, kissed her mother goodbye, came to school with all her work completed, and even finished the lunch Simmin made for her. She recalled in her head that somehow, she could find a reason that could justify Amani's actions as far as she could remember. Maryam had her hair on her right shoulder. She was in a great mood because that is who she was - an epitome of love, light, and everything bright. She was just sitting, imagining if the butterflies and flowers in her coloring book would ever come alive in front of her eyes when Amani sneaked the coloring book from right under her tiny fingers.

There was malice in her eyes, and she was almost foaming at the mouth.

"Why are you coloring butterflies when you belong with flies? I do not like you. You're impure and dirty. This coloring book stinks anyway," Amani said while throwing her coloring book on the dirty floor before proceeding to stomp on it.

Maryam was dumbfounded. It was never like this, at least not around her. They used to hear news about people they knew from the Baha'i community being taken against their will and humiliated. They were made to stand in front of the fire brigade with their eyes blindfolded. They were forced to accept Islam as their religion and step down from being a Baha'i. If they did not comply, there were dire consequences. The issues had started a long time ago, and there was a distance between people. Baha'i people were looked down upon, and their rights were being taken from them. Things were different, and Maryam could sense it. It was the time of the Islamic revolution that things started getting harder for minorities and especially the Baha'i community. Maryam was upset at what had happened at school, but she knew that when she asks her mother, she will get all her answers.

The bell rang, and Maryam lifted her head from her sad slumber. She had slept, crying on her desk. Her friends knew what had happened, but no one dared to comfort her as they were also shocked at what had occurred. Azadeh was watching students make a line towards the main door when she saw Maryam's face drenched in tears. Injustice was evident on her face. Azadeh went up to her and lifted her face by her chin. When she asked what happened twice, Maryam could not resist. The anger and confusion that was building inside her welled up, and she started sobbing while hugging Ms. Azadeh by her waist. Those hands had never held someone like that. She felt threatened and vulnerable. Azadeh held her against her chest until she calmed down. She continued to wipe her face with a tissue and told her that Amani would not bother her again since she had been told to bring her parents tomorrow. This was not a new incident. Since the Islamic revolution, people saw a great shift in energy and power of the people of Iran. We got to know how power corrupts and the most self-righteous people show their true colors.

Baha'is were undoubtedly dismayed by the stance of Ayatollah Khomeini, who, in December 1978, while still in exile in France, expressed his views in an interview with Professor James Cockroft of Rutgers University.

Professor James: "Will there be either religious or political freedom for the

Bahá'ís under an Islamic government?"

Ayatollah Khomeini: "They are a political faction. They are harmful. They will not be accepted."

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Professor James: "How about their freedom of religion — religious practice?"

Ayatollah Khomeini declared Iran an Islamic Republic on April 1, 1979, exactly two months after his return from exile. As the Islamic revolution gained momentum in the late summer of 1979, anti-Bahá'í religious elements saw an opportunity to realize their aim of eradicating the Bahá'í Faith from Iran. The Iranian people had just approved the imposition of religious rule in a referendum. Initial results showed a resounding 99% in favor, though the administration later admitted that the votes had been tampered with.

Khomeini promised to uplift the nation and improve the socioeconomic status of the poor by offering affordable housing, free electricity, free water, and free public transportation. However, due to the non-recognition, systematic persecution, arbitrary arrests, expropriation, and destruction of Bahá'í property, as well as torture and executions, the Islamic Revolution moved Iran closer to a theocracy and worsened the already precarious situation for Bahá'ís.

Hostility from the Iranian clerical elite was not new after they seized power in early 1979. Its origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the clerical class perceived the development of the Babi religion, the precursor to the Bahá'í Faith, as a threat to their monopoly on spiritual authority. The movement's founder, the Bab (Gate), claimed to be both a prophet and the herald of "him whom God shall manifest," a new messenger bearing a new revelation, as well as the return of the twelfth imam anticipated by Shi'is. This claim could not be reconciled with the traditional belief that Muhammad was "the seal of the prophets" and that Islam was the supreme religion.

After several years in prison, the Bab was publicly executed by a firing squad in Tabriz in June 1850 for refusing to recant his beliefs. Government forces faced resistance from the Babis, leading to bloody

conflicts in Zanzan, Neyriz, and Mazandaran, which resulted in thousands of deaths. Many innocent people, including the renowned poetess Tahereh, were massacred in 1852 following three unsuccessful attempts on Naser ed-Din Shah's life. The Bahá'ís were outraged and heartbroken by their leader's execution. Most Bahá'í leaders were killed, leaving those who survived disheartened and disorganized. The revolution appeared to have failed, the previous order was restored, and the Shi'i clergy's spiritual dominance was reaffirmed.

Amid this chaos and political complexity, Maryam walked toward the school gate with questions of her own. As always, Simmin was waiting for her by the gate, smiling and looking fresh. Simmin felt a surge of life whenever she saw Maryam walking towards her from school. However, today, she noticed Maryam looked particularly distressed.

Simmin quickly embraced Maryam, caressing her face before planting a kiss on her forehead.

“Tell me what happened, little Maryam. Are you okay?” Simmin asked with concern.

“Moman, why am I impure? Don't I look pretty?” Maryam asked through trembling lips while brushing her hair with her hand.

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Simmin was shocked to hear such profound words from her child. She realized that the persecution had reached their home. She asked Maryam to explain everything that had happened at school as they walked home. Maryam was an innocent soul, and all she needed was some words of encouragement from her mother and a handful of Gaz (a sweet treat) to feel aligned again.

Simmin told Maryam that when people are mean, it often stems from their own troubled backgrounds or what they have been taught at home. Simmin had always taught Maryam to be kind, and it came naturally to her. Even street cats would follow Maryam around because she treated them gently.

There was a revolution, purportedly for the good of the people and the betterment of society. However, there was an internal war — a one-sided conflict against the peaceful followers of a peaceful

religion. Discrimination against Bahá'ís became widespread, costing them their lives. What began as small acts of discrimination and hatred escalated into a full-blown crisis.

Systematic persecution and violence ensued. What started as petty disputes ignited a massive conflict in Iran. Once the new regime took power, the Shi'ih clergy made it their mission to eradicate any trace of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran. Their campaign was relentless and unforgiving. It wasn't Islam driving them; it was the hatred that clouded their judgment and prevented them from seeing that they should strive for growth and unity, rather than destruction.

The Bahá'í Faith, wherever it was found in the world, had a positive approach to life and worked for the betterment of society. Yet, Iran demanded complete submission, even if it meant abandoning their beliefs.

Gunmen squads surrounded the Bahá'í national offices in Tehran and began meticulously reviewing documents and membership lists.

They traced and tracked every Bahá'í listed and spared no method in punishing and torturing the innocent Bahá'í people into submission. Simultaneously, a fierce anti-Bahá'í propaganda campaign was launched, taking the form of denunciations from pulpits, press articles, and graffiti. The walls voiced their disdain for the Bahá'ís. People were prohibited from assembling in groups or even praying. Those caught doing anything forbidden by the clergy were subjected to brutal treatment by law enforcement and Shi'a extremists.

The Bahá'ís were branded as "heretics," "enemies of Islam," and "corrupt on earth." This led to a nationwide surge in attacks on Bahá'ís and their property. Bahá'ís were frequently killed, businesses were seized or destroyed, homes were set on fire, and believers were pressured to renounce their faith.

The Bahá'í community was especially at risk amidst the chaos following the fall of the Shah. Local religious officials, many affiliated with the Hojjatiyeh Society, orchestrated attacks on specific Bahá'ís and seized their property in various regions. A religious group known as the Foundation of the Dispossessed claimed ownership of all Bahá'í properties in a letter dated March 23, 1979,

and assigned Sheykh Sadeq Khalkhali, a prominent cleric, the home of the Bab, the most significant Bahá'í shrine in Iran.

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Global protests from the Bahá'í community proved ineffective. Appeals to the newly established government, led by the renowned human rights advocate Mehdi Bazargan, were silently dismissed. The shrine was destroyed in September by a mob led by clerics and employees of the Department of Religious Affairs. Property belonging to the Bahá'í community, including hospitals, community centers, libraries, and even cemeteries, was unlawfully seized nationwide. Over the next several years, a series of rules issued by prominent mujtahids (mullahs with the authority to issue court orders) sanctioned the expropriation of all Bahá'í properties, including private homes, businesses, and agricultural land.

“I told you not to associate with that heathen. If this continues, I will have to throw you out of the house with her, and then you both can suffer the wrath of God.” These words were like arrows piercing Maryam's heart. Maryam had forgotten what had happened at school the other day and was convinced it was because Amani was having a bad day. After school, she went straight to her best friend Parvaneh's house as usual. Sometimes Maryam was the host, and sometimes Parvaneh. Both families treated the girls with equal love and care. But today was different. The hatred and disgust in Parvaneh's mother's tone were unmistakable.

“Please don't shout. If she hears you, she'll be very upset,” Parvaneh pleaded with her mother to keep her voice down. This small resistance only made her mother react more aggressively.

She entered the room where Maryam sat trembling and grabbed her arm with a force she had never used before. Maryam's uncorrupted, loving heart was overwhelmed by the new feeling of hatred she sensed from those around her. As her mother dragged her out of the house, she said, “I never want to see you play with my daughter again, impure Bahá'í girl. Now I have to clean my house and dishes all over again. Your kind is nothing but a plague that Khomeini will eradicate.”

Maryam was left on the street, her bag lying in a puddle of water beside her, her heart shattered.

Parvaneh watched her best friend standing alone in the street but could not bring herself to offer any comfort. She feared facing her mother's wrath, and what her mother had been saying finally sank in.

Parvaneh's mind was overwhelmed with thoughts and what-ifs. Before she could process anything, a sharp slap from her mother silenced her thoughts. Oppression and mind control were occurring on both grand and minor scales. The time was critical, and faiths were being tested.

Far from the residential area, in a federal building, screams could be heard. A woman was pleading for the life of her husband. Her husband was telling her to stop crying and to believe in the teachings of the Bab. People were being forced to convert to Islam, with non-compliance resulting in further torture and the confiscation of their belongings and property. The Bahá'ís were helpless but steadfast. They knew they could not turn to the police or anyone else for help, as they had been declared impure and vermin. Instead of resorting to violence, they held each other close.

The Bahá'í faith stood firm like the mountains surrounding Tehran, while the repression felt like the relentless cold winds pursuing their downfall. What were once calm and peaceful nights had become hostile and frightening.

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Maryam found Tehran to be dull and unwelcoming. Though she was too young to grasp the full complexity and severity of the situation, she sensed a disconnect among the people. She could feel the sickening tension at the back of her neck—hostility and injustice sinking their talons into her thoughts.

Maryam was confused but observant, seeing things in vivid detail and from different perspectives. As an empath, she tried to make sense of other people's situations and behavior.

"Maryam, you haven't touched your food yet," Simmin's voice came out of nowhere, startling Maryam, who was absentmindedly stirring her rice with a spoon.

Simmin sat beside her, took the spoon from her hand, and began feeding her while gently caressing her hair. Maryam had been preoccupied with thoughts about the turmoil around her and had lost interest

in her appearance. The colors seemed dull, and the cold breeze from the mountains no longer felt refreshing. "Why is everyone fighting, Mother? What did we do to anyone to deserve this hatred?"

Simmin's expression remained unchanged. She was a woman of strong resolve. As she fed Maryam, she explained that ignorant and uneducated people often react this way because they cannot understand others' beliefs, leading them to make others feel bad.

Maryam struggled to understand the reason behind all the commotion. Everything had been fine just a few days ago, and now she was no longer friends with her first best friend. Her mind was filled with questions and theories, hoping that things would improve soon—miscommunication would be resolved, and peace would be restored.

The situation worsened with each passing day. The Bahá'ís, firm in their beliefs, held each other together more tightly than ever. The status of the Bahá'í minority deteriorated rapidly as the Shi'ih clerics assumed total control of the government.

They had been explicitly excluded from the new Islamic Constitution, which, like the old imperial one, depended entirely on belonging to one of the four "recognized religions" during the Bani Sadr era (i.e., Islam and the three smaller "tolerated faiths," Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism).²

Horrors increased daily: Bahá'í women were taken from their families, raped, and forced to marry Muslims. Graves were smashed open, and the remains of revered believers were dragged through the streets to be burned. Villagers in Nuk were forced to run through their own fields until they died.

One method of attacking the Bahá'í community was by denying them employment, which led to the impoverishment of many Bahá'ís. Local and national government agencies began firing Bahá'í employees one after another, openly stating that their dismissal was due to their membership in the "misguided sect." Records show that religious, judicial, and administrative institutions collaborated to remove every Bahá'í from the civil service, regardless of their profession—whether as college professors, doctors, nurses, or army officers.

Bani Sadr was the very first president of Iran after the revolution

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Bahá'ís were declared "sub-human" by mullahs and were treated inhumanely: they were bridled like donkeys, led through the streets, chained in stables, and fed on grass. Bahá'í girls were kidnapped from their families, raped, and forced to marry Muslims. Widows of men who had been executed were forced to pay for the bullets that had killed their husbands. Graves were broken open, and the bodies of highly respected believers were dragged through the streets and burned on garbage heaps.

All Bahá'í marriages, regardless of their length, were declared null and void. Bahá'í family life was labeled as prostitution (which itself was punishable by death), and Bahá'í children were declared illegitimate, with their parents denied any legal claim to them. The "Law of Retaliation" aimed to recreate medieval Islamic law, with varying rights and penalties for Muslims and members of the three "tolerated minorities" (Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians), who were not eligible for civil protection.

"We cannot do anything about it. We can only wait for the justice of God to rain down upon everyone who is part of this inequality," Farzad, an experienced old Bahá'í man, said, pointing his finger toward the sky. Farzad was fearless; he laughed in the face of danger and did not fear death. He wanted to be the torchbearer, guiding all Bahá'ís to safety from the horrors of Iran. Farzad was a medium-height, strong man with a charismatic presence. He had the ability to inspire even the timidest soul. However, at that moment, he could not find the words to comfort the old Bahá'í man, who was sitting on the ground, sobbing over the loss of his loved ones and his wealth. The clergy had broken his spirit and taken away his only happiness.

When Farzad returned home from work, he found that his house's door had been broken, and his son and grandchildren were gone. He immediately knew what had happened and rushed to the nearest police station, where he was initially mocked and then asked to pay a hefty sum of money for the return of his children. He tried his best to gather the required amount but could not collect

more than he already had.

He left, promising to bring more if they would not harm his son or grandchildren. As he sat in front of one of his relatives, listening to his lament about being robbed of all their belongings by the new regime's enforcers, there was a knock on the newly repaired door.

It was Adib, a young Bahá'í man. He looked at Farzad and said:

"I have bad news. We just found his son,"—pointing to the old man sitting on the floor—"He's by the shore of the Karaj River, near the city of Karaj." ³ He has lost a lot of blood and he was calling for his father", Adib said.

The old man placed the teacup on the wooden table with trembling hands, trying to hold his composure. His eyes welled up with tears, and his heart began to sink. A rush of memories flooded his mind: memories of his brilliant, hard-working son, whom he had raised with the expectation that he would support him in old age. The old man had faced and overcome every hardship with grace. His intuition told

³ Its headwaters of river are in the Central Alborz mountain range, north of Tehran in Alborz Province. It flows south past the city of Karaj, which is 43km from Tehran

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him it was already too late to rush now. His feet could not coordinate with his mind, and his tongue felt numb. He stammered, "I should be going. I guess I don't need the money to save my son's life anymore.

All I have now is enough to send my child off to the great beyond. He will not be forgotten, and his death will not be in vain." He stumbled toward the door with his walking stick. Adib opened the door for him. The cold wind hit their faces, and reality set in more deeply. This was genocide. No one was coming to rescue them. This was the ultimate test. Times like these either make you or break you. The old man was too old to start over.

His son's lifeless body was found washed ashore, marked with torture, telling the world the story of his suffering. A few days later, he buried his son in his backyard, knowing that the regime showed no mercy to the dead or to Bahá'í cemeteries.

A few days later, the old man held a small ceremony next to his son's grave in his memory. Farzad walked him back from the gravesite and now stood in front of his house. Farzad tried to comfort the old man. Maryam came out with a glass of water. She walked up to the old man and offered him the water by tapping him on the shoulder.

When he looked up, he saw the face of an angel, with her hair resting beautifully on her right shoulder.

"Thank you, dear. I'm trying to get them to bring Farah back," said Farah's grandfather, referring to Maryam's playmate. "I know it has become lonely for both of us," he added.

Later, he looked up at the sky and mumbled a few words, likely cursing everyone responsible for the suffering inflicted on his family. Maryam could not bear to see her friend's grandfather like this. She felt miserable and terrified that something might happen to her own family. She imagined her mother crying hysterically, especially after losing her husband.

The thought of her mother's sorrow sent jitters down her spine. She stayed there until her father-in-law passed out, crying and mumbling at the man in the clouds. Farzad was getting late and could not stay longer, so he helped the old man into his now broken and silent house.

All of this was because the new regime did not align with the Bahá'í faith. The Bahá'í faith emphasizes issues like gender equality, world peace, adoration of one God, and the fusion of science and religion. It takes a modern and scientific approach to these issues. In contrast to Muslims, Bahá'ís interpret prophecies and end-times references symbolically, as changes in the ages or eras of mankind, rather than as belief in Muhammad as God's ultimate messenger. They also believe that God's guidance is still being advanced.

The Islamic clergy's rejection of the notion that there could be a revelation from God after Muhammad, whom they see as "the last of the Prophets," has been a primary cause of enmity toward the Bahá'í minority. This theological issue is compounded by the clerical fear of the social teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The new Faith holds that because humanity has reached a point of union, religion must focus on

fostering that unity and overcoming racial, religious, linguistic, and national barriers. The establishment

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of gender equality, the promotion of universal education with an emphasis on the sciences, and support for international and non-partisan organizations are ideals highly valued in Bahá'í texts and are seen as leading to the foundation of a global government. Such ideas were abhorrent to the Shi'ih establishment in the nineteenth century and remain so to their contemporary counterparts.

In towns and villages, Bahá'ís elected nine members from among themselves to manage their community and oversee tasks like marriage, counseling, burials, and representing the community to local officials. These councils were called "Local Spiritual Assemblies." Bahá'ís established thousands of local assemblies worldwide, even in Islamic nations, but Iran is the only country where members of these assemblies, as well as the national assembly, were detained and even executed. Bahá'ís were accused of being spies for countries like Russia, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Israel.

The clergy and their henchmen roamed like wild dogs, destroying and looting everything in their path.

They did everything they could to break the Bahá'ís' faith and make them submit. Places where the Bahá'í faith was taught, and where people in Tehran learned about their ancestors and beliefs, were demolished.

Bahá'í institutions were abolished. Initially, they would blame individuals for being spies for the U.S. or Israel, forcibly entering their homes to seize valuable items.

Usually, both partners in a household were arrested, and if there were children, they were left to fend for themselves. Everyone feared this could happen to them, so they kept a low profile. The community's assets were seized, sacred sites destroyed, and graves vandalized. The Bahá'í faith lacked civil rights.

Bahá'ís were prohibited from working for the government, enforcing contracts, practicing law, receiving pensions, enrolling in higher education institutions, and openly expressing their religious beliefs. The plan was to prevent the spread of the Bahá'í faith.

Maryam's world was crashing around her. Her young mind could not comprehend what was happening in Tehran. She feared for her loved ones and for herself. The stage was set for

her world to be turned
upside down, changing her perception of the society she had grown up in. The
veil was lifting, revealing
the hideous face of society. There was no love here now—only the love of
power and control.

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