



IN THE NAME OF PEACE

Fiction · Poems · Essays
The Arts in Review

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The Mirror Triptych

THE FIRST REFLECTION: IMPOTENCE

THE TWO WITH SCRAGGLY BEARDS pushed on the desk. The third, his back to the door, older, smelling of aftershave, admired the result. "Over there, place it over there." The metal desk was dragged howling all the way to the corner of the empty room. So they didn't hear the tall, pale man come in.

"Pardon me, but could you help me?" All three men stopped and turned toward him. The important man wore his glasses on top of his bald dome. The other two young look-alikes had thin hawkish faces and thin, wiry, bent bodies. Dressed like twins, they wore black bell-bottoms, Dr. Scholl's clogs over dusty brown socks, and white shirts soaked under the armpits from the present work and ringed yellow from previous tasks.

"Look what the cat dragged in," one of the bearded men said with wonder in the voice, wonder at the presumption.

"I knocked, no one heard," the man said. The faint western accent made him somewhat interesting to the older man. Not to the other two.

"You knocked, no one heard," mimicked the man. "Well, here you wait for an answer from the Doctor-Director."

With mock weariness the Director brought his glasses down to take the measure of the newcomer. "It's my first day. I am going to make an exception," he said. "What is it you want?"

The man rummaged through every pocket of his crumpled brown suit. On the second go-round he found two pieces of paper stapled together. "It says here that you have my brother's body." He pointed to the papers in his hand as evidence. "It says that I am to collect his body here. It says you can't bury an unbeliever." The Director noticed a hysterical edge in the young man's voice.

"Now calm down. Let me see the papers." He lifted his glasses from his nose and held them in the air in front of his eyes while he read. He finished by placing the glasses on his head. "Well,

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the problem is simple"—the indulgence was replaced by a brisk business manner—"your brother suffered a heart attack four days ago, in the middle of the street. He was taken to the hospital but pronounced dead on arrival. The hospital couldn't find any relatives and sent the body to us. All according to regulations, you would agree. We found an old aunt still alive, so we contacted her. I presume she contacted you. And here you stand ready to claim your brother's body. Oh, and please accept my deepest regrets." He handed back the papers and turned his face to his enraptured audience.

"Mr. Doctor, I mean Mr. Director, the problem is in the death certificate. It forbids burial," the young man insisted. The Director grabbed back the papers from the gangly young man who wasn't that young, thirty-two to be precise. He flicked the first page into the air and studied the second. He was through before the page gently settled back over the death certificate. Having filled out these forms for the past five years, until his promotion to the directorship of the morgue a week ago, he was thoroughly familiar with every step.

"I see the confusion. This paper doesn't forbid burial. You must understand, we honor Armenian martyrs, but your brother died of a heart attack. There is no room in the cemetery. You have your own grounds, take him there."

"Armenian! We are not Armenians."

"Your name is Armenian, your family lives in an Armenian apartment block, you have an Armenian accent, and yet you deny your own race. You must be ashamed of yourself."

For the first time that day the young man relaxed. It was all a misunderstanding. The *ian* ending of his name had many precedents. The apartment blocks were situated behind his father's house. As for his accent, it had been fourteen years since his last visit. He had arrived from America only this morning.

"Let me look into it," the Director said. He turned and ordered one of the bearded young men to go right downstairs to the morgue and investigate. The three of them spent a silent but pleasant five minutes before the phone rang. The Director picked up the phone from the floor in the corner of the room and walked to the desk while he listened.

"Prepare him, we'll be right down." He set the phone down on the far corner of the desk and admired the effect.

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The echo in the damp room imposed a false sense of respect, as in a museum. In the corner an old faucet splashed water freely on the cement floor. The water spread on itself, always seeming wetter, heading toward the center of the room. The square drain in the middle sounded like someone pissing his heart out. A loud bang from behind made the young man from America jump. The rolling stretcher pushed open the double doors. Nothing in his background had prepared the young man for seeing his brother's body.

His resume says it. Seamless years: high school to college to college to job to job. There was a certain symmetry in the years. The Seattle years book-ended by the Boston years. There were no gaps. Responsibilities neatly separated by semicolons. No periods of idle curiosity.

So nothing in his background prepared him for the sight of his brother's naked body. Yellow soles, a tag on the big toe. No sheets covered the body. The bulge in the stomach askew set in rigor mortis. The body seemed to have been rubbed thoroughly with ash. Shark gray. The face so familiar. No mistaking they were brothers. The dead face a little fleshier, almost healthier. Same nose, eyes and mouth. The Director glanced back and forth between him and the body. Resemblance between people always creates beatific wonder.

"As you can perfectly well see," the Director pointed to the lower abdomen, "it's no use denying your origins. Please arrange suitable transportation." His voice rang loud and clear like a guide pointing out interesting details on the walls of a mosque. He lowered his voice: "Upstairs someone could help you find a suitable vehicle. They are reasonable."

The wretched man, his face distorted by grief and confusion, now as gray as the cadaver, still didn't understand. He just mumbled. The new Director didn't think of himself as unreasonable. He had seen it before, of course. It happened to most of these Western-educated: this loss of subtlety. With this first case in his new position, he could show the patience the job required. Nevertheless, the dense young man had to be handled with more authority, had to be talked to with the directness of an American.

"You are an obstinate young man. I don't pretend to know your motives. I can assure you of one thing: No cemetery will

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perform the ablution to an uncircumsized body. Please make proper arrangements by tomorrow, or we will have to dispose of the body by other means. Take. Him. Away. By. Tomorrow," repeated the Director.

"Take him where?"—he shouted the first part of the sentence, but quickly lowered his voice.

"Take him to your own people. They will bury him for you." The Director's gesture made him look again at the body.

"Who are my people?" he said, not quite sure.

His adam's apple, big as a turtle's head and with almost the same texture, slithered back and forth with each thick gulp of the carrot juice. He put the large glass on the warped tin counter pocked with little indentations. He took a white handkerchief from his side pocket and wiped the orange froth from his upper lip. He missed the few bubbles on the tip of his nose. It didn't matter. The rain washed it off when he stepped out from beneath the parapet. Thirst, hunger, sleep—he never would have thought of them as interfering with his immaculate grief.

He walked through Manouchehri among the antique shops and the stationers toward the English Embassy compound. Took a right on Ferdowsi, passing what used to be a mix of carpet dealers and money changers, and headed straight for the square. One of the few places that hadn't changed names. The children's globe-like heads, on the huge Canada Dry neon sign, sipped as thirstily as ever. It was his neighborhood, regardless of the new names. The familiarity of the surroundings didn't affect him. There was purpose to his gait. He turned right into the last possible side street before the square onto the most familiar ground he had ever known. The wind drove the rain in curving sheets of water slapping the brick buildings on the narrow side street. Two weak streetlights on each end of the alley only purpled the darkness. The entrance to the cul-de-sac, somewhere in the middle of the side street, wasn't visible. He knew it was there. The cul-de-sac formed by the two large gates at the other end and the entrance to his father's house. The alley was actually wider than the side street he was standing on. The seven-to-eight-floor apartment buildings on each side made it seem narrow. A trickle of memory squeezed through, bringing warmer seasons: Spring and Summer.

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There, in the alley, a hundred yards down to the right of where he stood, at four o'clock sharp, after the dust had been watered down by the tenants with tin ewers, this blind alley transformed itself into a private stadium. From the surrounding apartments poured a dozen or more neighborhood boys to play soccer. It was no simple game of skilled little feet vying for the spherical bladder. There were spectators involved. Their attitude brought to mind the Roman arena games, Christians against lions, neither scared. Both entertaining and lucrative.

Above, what seemed then to be hundreds of women, mostly Armenian, hanging out of the windows, their large torsos flattened under their folded arms on the window sills, their pendulous breasts tight against cotton dresses. And completing each frame were *tromp l'oeils* of small children, not yet old enough to join in the play, sticking their heads out from every available space not already taken by their mother's formidable bodies.

The women lived at their windows; they ran their households from them. They brought groceries from the streets, shouting their orders down in a melange of Farsi and Armenian, the elements of each language so mixed that only the street vendors could communicate with them. He didn't remember all this with the inaccuracies of having lived through it. What remained were impressions more theatrical, like an enormous puppet show; the buildings were huge sheets of decorated cardboard with cutouts where the permanent female puppets waved their baggy arms and jerked their heads on cue. Whenever one of the women left her cutout he remembered it as a kind of mechanical defect in the strings or else the puppeteer had an itch.

There was the exaggerated silence after the sides were picked. Like just before a curtain call, the overhead marketplace sounds died down to a polite chit-chat, the window ladies throwing down occasional motherly suggestions. With the first roll of the ball, the ladies, like barnyard fowl, started their picking and clucking, assessing every shade of advantage or drawback to each team. They placed complicated betting combinations. With the help of shopping baskets lowered from floor to floor and across balconies, the women collected the glossy blue gambling chips. They took the whole affair so seriously that all of them, including the top floor tenants, chipped in whatever money they could spare to get metal bars placed on the windows of the

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bottom two floors to protect the tenants down there watching the game. From behind the bars, the tenants stood like frustrated prisoners: face between the bars, hands gripping the bars on either side of the face. Every time the ball hit the bars, the reactive duck and the lightning reappearance reinforced the puppet image.

After the betting, ten minutes into the game, the coaching staff began to oversee and protect their interests. Those women who had sons in the game sat with a certain emphasized dignity, especially if the son happened to be a skilled player. They made suggestions to their neighbors, not so immediately involved, and they, in turn, would shout down directions and warnings, sometimes screaming so loudly that the game stopped to see if any serious accident had occurred.

The bad feeling and fighting generated during the game continued well after it. Often, when the unknowing husband came home around eight, the loud interminable complaining at the kitchen table could be heard all around the neighborhood. Before you knew it, the entire block of apartments would be up in arms, hollering and calling out insults to the next balcony over. One time Monsieur Georgique, the car mechanic, slapped another husband over a problem concerning his wife and a losing bet that became a celebrated court case calling half the neighborhood as witnesses for either side.

Only memories. He didn't walk toward the house. He had come for a more practical purpose. So instead he entered the small barber shop immediately to his right.

In the shop the dense air, the smell of tobacco, lotion, and sweat all had been preserved. Thirty years, each molecule undisturbed. Golchin, the barber, cutting hair, the reflection in the mirror not a day over forty. Himself, as a ten-year-old, standing in the same spot: sweaty, foot on foot, chest heaving, red-faced from the street soccer, wanting yet another haircut to serve as alibi for his absence from the house. Haircuts excused everything to his father. It showed discipline. His own father had gotten a haircut once a week for forty years.

An old man walked in from the back room drying his hands. It upset the picture in his mind. It was an old Golchin. For an instant he thought he saw the space between the two men filled, in a blur, with numerous Golchins at different stages of life.

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(A little like the serial pictures in the biology texts showing the evolution of man from the sea.)

"Let me take your coat, you are all wet," said the old man. Golchin's boy spoke in a grumble from the other side of the room to the man under his razor. "You must excuse my son. He will be with you in a few minutes." The shop hadn't changed one bit. Two wooden chairs upholstered with red worn-out plastic faced two square mirrors. Between the two mirrors, on the wall, an inventory of instruments, clippers, scissors, pivots, razors, and a hair drier hung askew.

Behind, lined on the opposite wall, three more wooden chairs served the waiting. These chairs were not fixed to the floor and could not be tilted back and forth like the two in front. In all other respects, the chairs were identical. A small oil heater burned in one corner. Burnt orange peels, wreathed and curled on top of it. Even the plank used across the armrest of the barber's chairs for elevating children, even that stood in the corner next to the tin can. The tin can contained a mixture of oil and pomade promised to delay baldness. The only difference, he noticed, were the pictures hanging on the wall. Portraits of Khomeini and two other Mullahs. They replaced completely the monarchs. Not a good sign for what he was about to ask.

"I am not here for a haircut. I need to talk to you, Mr. Golchin," the man said.

"To me," said old Golchin. "Why would you want to talk to me?" The son, curious, approached them with razor in hand. The man on the chair, half his face covered with foam, a little like a theatrical mask, stretched his neck backward to see.

"What do you want from my father? Who are you?" the son asked.

The man ignored the son, but not the question. "Mr. Golchin, you probably don't remember me. I'm the son of the General next door. You used to cut our hair."

Golchin relaxed. "I remember you. You are the brother in America," he said. "Please accept my deepest regrets. We heard only yesterday. The house has been empty for a week. I knew something was wrong when your brother didn't show up for his weekly haircut. And when that jackal of a servant disappeared, I was sure. He filled the car and left." Then suddenly aware of the other man in the chair, he quickly introduced his

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son, ordered him back to work, and directed the man to the back room for some tea.

The tiny back room was a storage room with two metal folding chairs, a Samovar, and a small bed. Golchin filled two cups. He handed one to the grateful man, who began sipping from it. Golchin watched. An amused look came over him. "You and your brother," Golchin shook his head, "always in trouble with your father. You were the quiet one. Your brother. Phewww. What a boy. Only your father could control him. You remember the time he got his face bashed in. I patched him up. He comes in bleeding from every hole on his face and says clean me up before the General comes home. Thirteen years old. Imagine. I look and the nose is half way down his face. So he tells me to straighten it up. I take his nose between my two palms, just like this, and crunch. Didn't even flinch. What a boy! Your father never even knew."

Golchin was wrong. The General noticed everything: on this occasion with a great deal of pride. The fight grew out of the soccer games in the alley.

A painful memory. But he rolled it over in his head like prodding a loose tooth with his tongue. The hubbub of the game was interrupted every day around five when their father's car, a light blue Oldsmobile, entered the alley. It would roll slowly to a halt in front of the immense wooden doors, now one of the soccer goals, and out would step Musio the driver to open the doors. The women quieted. Bowing their heads in slow and gentle tones of recognition and reverence, their lips pronouncing greetings without vocal chords.

Musio was a Russo-Armenian first-generation emigre. Everyone called him Musio. It was a bastardization of the French *Monsieur*. Easily the largest man in the neighborhood, the beefy type. While driving he'd place a large white handkerchief on his large stomach so that his white shirt would not collect the dust imprint of the wheel. He also had the reddest neck of the neighborhood, with large cracks and wrinkles forming a complicated network. He was ugly, with a large and oily flat nose. All in all, difficult to see what the fuss over him was about. Pierro, the blond-haired, blue-eyed boy with the translucent skin (a leaf-like system of blue veins distinctly visible on his temple) told him once in a fit of giggle: "It's because he has a big thing."

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Both his brother and he sat in the back seat and watched the other boys with envy, while Musio watched the ladies like a fox outside a chicken coop. He couldn't remember the first time they played a game. It was around the time the General replaced the huge wooden gates with a big green metal one with all sorts of fancy locks. It began as a suggestion by Musio during the General's trips. The General visited his properties in Hamadan, and increasingly he preferred to do his own driving. Later, they played every afternoon while their father was at the office. They risked a good beating.

At first their presence delighted everyone. Especially the women, because now Musio stood in the far corner of the alley where the wall and the big green door met, giving the ladies a clear view of him. He stood rigidly, occasionally using his keys to clean the wax out of his ears. Once in a while, when the ball came close to him, his foot would jerk out like a mule, and he'd kick the ball so hard that it was a wonder no one was injured. Then he'd smile in a self-deprecating way, sending the ladies into a delightful chorus of appreciation. Musio didn't interfere with the serious business of the game. The audience adjusted itself to the new arrangement and separated strategic moves from flirtation.

The brothers' complacency was short-lived. They began to perceive problems on the horizon of their contained world. The other, though not a good player, gradually took control of things. At first he made suggestions whose logic seemed to please everyone playing. He'd choose teams fairly without paying attention to the motherly suggestions. Soon he began to come up with new rules for every conceivable circumstance. What if the ball fell into the gutter? What if the ball crossed the markings representing the goal? What if Musio kicked the ball? And so on, like a cool and professional advisor. Incredible as it was, the other boys were happy with the new ways. Arguments ceased, and when a troubling point without precedent threatened to disturb the smoothness of the game, everyone turned to his brother to settle the dispute.

It was in the second spring, during the first game of the season, if it could be called a season, that he made his famous speech. There in the alley, five minutes into the game, during the period of betting, he stopped the game and in a clear, high-pitched

voice like a castrato rebuked the women. He scolded them for their morality, their pettiness, their greed. Only fourteen years old. Everyone listened, hypnotized by the confidence. He forbade all future betting, and to show his seriousness he threatened them with the authority of the General.

An old man's speech; a young boy's innocence. Too young to understand that these ladies were not to be deprived of their fun. Two or three weeks into the prohibition, Eduardo, a sixteen-year-old, the oldest among us, picked the fight. This well built, almost brainless man-child walked around with pockets full of aspirins and Vitamin C tablets, popping them like candy. A harmless fellow, and were it not for his mother's privileged status among the other Armenians in the gallery, he would have been stopped from playing a long time ago.

Edo, as he was known, provoked his brother throughout the game, indiscreetly tripping him, and daring him. Then the fight broke out. Edo was on him like a wild animal. There was a weak, flailing scuffle, and then Edo was sitting on his brother's chest, beating him furiously with his fists. Every way he looked there were screaming humans: the boys circled the fight and screamed; the women screeched from above as if a perpetual brake were being applied to a car; at the end of the alley Musio paced as if also part of the plot. Then all movement froze, breathing froze, noise froze. The punching stopped, and instead a different struggle took place between the fighters. His brother had somehow got hold of Edo's index finger and was twisting it back with all his strength. Every face wore the grimace that anticipates the bursting of a balloon. Had that glorious crack come, it would have echoed around the neighborhood. It never came. The red tip of the finger slowly disappeared in the sweaty fist and finally slipped out of the grip. The world of slow motion was ended. The fists resumed their hammering. By the time Musio separated them the damage was done.

His brother stood up, dazed, his face covered with blood, his nose at an impossible angle. He brushed away Musio's hand contemptuously and walked toward Golchin's shop. Up in the windows, it seemed the puppet master had dropped all the strings. No one moved. Like images on a stopped film, they were stuck in poses of surprise, their mouths strained, their eyes glossy and unfocused. His brother didn't talk to him for months. He'd

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been held back by two other boys, but he knew that his efforts to free himself and help his brother lacked conviction.

"To tell the truth," Golchin said, "your brother was the spitting image of your father, down to his haircuts. Once a week, short back and sides, you know what I mean, the military style. Yes . . . tough man that brother of yours. Just the other day . . ." Golchin stopped the reminiscing, aware that the young man in front of him needed more than consolation.

"I need your help," the young man said. "I need you to perform a circumcision."

THE SECOND REFLECTION: FORGIVENESS

IT TURNED OUT TO BE an ordinary salon. Shiny cream-colored linoleum tiles covered the split-level floor. On the upper level, a dozen haircutting units lined the wall, each with a sink, a flexible chrome hand-shower and a large mirror. The chairs, light-tan imitation leather, sat snugly on stubby metal cylinders. Attached were corrugated pedals. On the lower level, separated by a mock-Baroque, wrought-iron railing, a row of blue molded plastic-laundromat chairs were joined to one another.

A middle-aged woman watched me from behind a festooned lectern. "You got an appointment?" The book lay on the spread wings of a wooden eagle.

"For ten o'clock." I gave her my name. The smell of herbal shampoo permeated the place.

"Please take a seat. Someone will be with you. Andre, music. A customer."

Someone turned on the music. A girl in tight jeans and a nipple-sensitive T-shirt, a cup of coffee in hand, swayed her hips three times and stopped.

A man waltzed over. "My name is Andre, would you step this way." I looked up and recognized Golchin parading as a sixty-year-old fag with an affected French accent. I knew the blotched face despite the makeup and the years. He took off his red velvet jacket with a flourish and slipped on an azure tunic, the type surgeons wear.

I sat at the unit closest to the window. A diploma, written in Latin with a thick Roman font, hung on the wall. His

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assumed name typed, somewhere in the middle of the page, by a regular typewriter on an overused ribbon. From where I sat, I could see the shop sign swinging gently in the wind. It read:

Adam and Eve's

Get a Head Start

Andre LaTour - Consultant Hairstylist

He picked up a pair of scissors and snipped at the air. He poked a finger at my head to get the desired tilt. The prodding finger steered me backward to my childhood. He began cutting strands of hair . . . five, six, seven, and eight. More mid-air snips. The nervous chatter of the scissors was like a signature.

In Tehran, Golchin had been our neighborhood barber. His two-room shop, two blocks from our house, was located in Ferdowsi Square. Named for the epic poet, our own homegrown Homer. In those days a mousy-gray statue of Ferdowsi stood, one hand holding his epic—the book of the kings—and the other hand dramatically raised in a recital pose.

Looking down on the poet, seven stories above Golchin's shop, stood a huge Canada Dry neon. In the evenings, five international heads—the Chinese and Negro boys clearly identifiable—lit up. They sipped horizontal bars of orange electricity through huge neon straws. The complicated electrical circuits went out from top to bottom, the pattern refilling the contents of the giant bottle.

This ceaseless labor by the unquenchable children resumed every eight seconds. On the eighth second the bottle filled in a scintillating flicker. This gigantic, optical metronome determined the evening pulse of the neighborhood.

Because of it, in the back alley, we played a disconnected soccer game whose pace depended on our seeing the ball. Around the square, the walnut vendors peeled their produce like an automated bottling factory. Their peeling always culminated in a "full light" inspection of the walnut—a little like a jeweler holding a diamond toward the light but much faster. Golchin's shop was directly underneath the sign. He got his snipping style to keep in rhythm with the replenishing static.

"Can you lift your legs?" A sixteen-year-old boy appeared

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with a broom. The soft broom, silent on the linoleum, pushed hair out of my peripheral vision.

"Later, not with a customer at the chaise." Golchin shooed the boy with both arms. "You will excuse the boy, he's new."

An elderly lady with curlers already set under her pink scarf walked into the salon. The receptionist ushered her to a chair across the room. "Her husband died six months ago," he whispered as he bent at the knees, letting two strands of my moist hair slip between his fingers. One proved shorter, for an instant. "She thinks he's still alive. Poor man died mowing his lawn. The ground opened up. Really, it did. He fell into an old sewage duct."

I mumbled in a sympathetic tone. If he only knew who sat in his "chaise," he'd bury the scissors in my neck. I relaxed a little. How could he? I was only eight then.

In those days, Golchin provided an assortment of services besides cutting, shaving or trimming hair. He saw himself as an amateur M.D. escorting mothers to the delivery room, making late night calls to sick children, fixing the men's back problems. He also performed circumcisions. He held visiting hours between eight and noon and received his patients in the back room of his shop. He honestly believed that cutting hair belonged in a doctor's training curriculum. Wasn't hair a part of the body? In those days, still a long way off from the social turmoils of the late seventies, Golchin lived the busy, respectable life of an upstanding businessman.

So the man standing behind me holding thinning scissors couldn't be classified as the robust emigrant, out of a job, in search of opportunity. More accurately, he fell victim to a moment of childish greed known only to my brother and I.

My father, a police general, felt kindly toward Golchin. Kindly meant a nod at Golchin's profuse welcomes once a week when my father got a hair cut.

Two weeks before my brother's seventh birthday, my father, while getting a haircut, made arrangements with Golchin to perform my brother's circumcision. He had been born with a weak heart, so the operation wasn't performed in infancy. (Two years ago my brother died, in the middle of the street, from a heart attack.) Father set the date for the eleventh of January, the day after my brother's birthday. Presents would ease the pain

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and unhappiness.

It was a crisp, sunny day. Not yet spring. A crow's croaking and its accompanying echo in the garden insisted it was winter. Left outside to dry, dozens of wide trays smeared with cooked plums were vulnerable to our skidding fingertips. In the corner, corridors of laundry fluttered.

I brought out a stool from the kitchen and put it close to the hedge outside the dining room window where the circumcision was to take place. In the far corner the large metal cabinet from the upstairs bedroom stood covered with a large white towel: the operating table. Soon the door opened and mother entered holding my brother's hand. He wore only a T-shirt. His belly button stuck out like the inside of an overblown balloon stem. Days of parental brainwashing had worn off, he looked terrified.

My mother put her hands under his armpits and lifted him up to the table, swinging him in the air in a playful sort of way. Through the closed window I heard her voice feigning the sound of a train or a plane. It didn't work.

Then my father walked into the dining room through the door connecting the kitchen and the servants' quarters. It almost made me fall into the hedge. He came straight from work in uniform with its full chest of decorations. Behind him came Golchin. He took care to remove his shoes before stepping onto the Turkeman rug. Neither my brother nor I liked Golchin. He used to wear a white uniform with a Cossack-style collar, like a priest's collar but buttoned all the way up on the side. Under his arm he carried a rolled brown leather pouch, like the complimentary tool kit in the trunk of a new car.

He was unusually tall, and his thin face had been ravaged by smallpox. He combed his hair back, revealing even more of the tiny craters. The black hair shone with the latest pomades: one long, clumpy strand always adorned his forehead, which he abruptly swept back at regular intervals with a simultaneous motion of hand and head. He was the type of barber children hate most, full of charm and respect for the parent sitting on the bench behind, while he poked his index finger once too often into the head of the child.

That morning he walked into the room and made a formal half bow to my mother and straightened himself with a swipe at the rebellious hair. He unfolded his kit on the dining room table, all the while explaining, I supposed, the details of the

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procedure to my father. His thumb and forefinger joined delicately to emphasize some detail; his rotating wrists stressed the fragile nature of the operation.

My brother sat on the table crying, sneaking looks at Golchin and my father furtively. Once in a while, unconsciously, he twisted his head to free his neck from mother's light grip. My mother, who listened to Golchin as unconsciously, returned her hand to his neck. Finally, my father made an impatient grimace as if to say "yes, yes, but let's get going" and turned to my mother so abruptly that it stopped Golchin's hand in mid-air (and, I assumed, also his sentence).

From among his tools, Golchin took a twenty-inch bamboo stick which he split laterally with his pen knife, extending the crack eight or nine inches. He walked to the operating table, pulled at the foreskin and slid it all the way down in between the crack. My brother's crying was now one long gasp, and his face had turned blue as a newborn. Golchin held the end of the stick with one hand; with the other he fished a piece of red and white string—the type used on pastry boxes—out of his back pocket and wrapped it around the bamboo stick. He went back to the dining table and chose a shaving razor and opened the blade.

He walked towards my brother, dramatic and villainous. My father glared at him. He hesitated, then clapped his hand to his forehead and ran out of the room. He emerged from the kitchen only a few feet away from where I stood. He ignored me and headed straight for his scooter in the corner of the yard. He rummaged in the side bags, muttering. He found the alcohol bottle and ran back into the house. There was panic in the sound of his flat, socked feet on the moist mud. I felt sorry for him. He took two steps into the room but then carefully retraced his steps. He removed his socks stuffing them in his shoes so as not to stain the carpet.

My father was angry. I saw it in his damp eyes behind the thick glasses. Golchin quickly disinfected the razor with a cotton swab drenched in alcohol.

No risk-taking with someone in my father's position. He swung one leg over the table as if mounting a horse, showing a yellowed sole and blocking my view. All I saw were the ends of the bamboo stick pointing out like a propeller. Golchin's elbow was high as he pulled in earnest. His razor hand came

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out—like a sparrow poised to fly from a branch. The hand disappeared, my mother turned her head in a grimace of pain, and there I was staring into her face. I ran into the garden.

“If you’d kindly bend your head forward . . .” Golchin began shaving my neck. The scrape of the razor made me curious. Could it be the same razor? A loud snow removal truck passed, rattling the window. He straightened up until the truck passed, displeased at the interruption. Not the same razor, this one had an onyx handle. Golchin continued his delicate work. As I watched him in the mirror, I felt responsible for his aging.

The afternoon of the circumcision my brother and I played in our room with an assortment of new toys. I sat on the floor, my brother on the bed. There was a package between his legs which I hadn’t seen among the toys. I felt a combination of curiosity, anger and envy. I rolled a small Matchbox ambulance towards the bed. The white ambulance back doors opened on tiny hinges revealing a red interior with a red plastic stretcher inside. I guided the car to the edge of the bed making car sounds. As I neared, my brother held tightly to the toys. He never dreamed that I’d pounce and grab at the gauze package.

He let out a series of muffled cries into the blanket to protect me from our father’s temper. We both looked as the blood seeped out to the edges of the gauze. He bled, I screamed. My parents ran in, questioning us, him soothingly, me sharply. They wrapped him in a blanket, and we all drove to the hospital. Over and over my mother said that she shouldn’t have allowed Golchin into the house, that she’d warned my father about allowing a quack to perform surgery, that this man was a danger to the community and must be stopped. For the second time that day, I noticed my father’s pickled eyes. I can honestly say that my attack was caused only by the lure of that extra toy. My brother and I kept silent. Neither of us told them what I did.

My father never said anything either. Even so, Golchin closed up shop and disappeared. People talked. He was seen, at night, pushed into a car. He was heard by a neighbor pleading innocence. One person, a prison guard, cousin of the wife of the Assyrian mechanic, went so far as to claim he had witnessed a beating: the soles of Golchin’s feet, he said, were beaten skinless. Incidents were described with interchangeable protagonists, seen or heard by those whose imagination fed their

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memories. Nobody believed Mrs. Haratunian, the Armenian widow, when she said that she lent him money to leave the country. In the neighborhood, my father gained a reputation for ruthlessness. Years later, the revolutionary courts heard testimony implicating him in crimes against the neighborhood.

Golchin pruned more hair around the edges, farting water from a plastic bottle to dampen my hair. He innocently took two steps back to let out this emasculated little sneeze like tissue drawn from its box. Like a spy in a B movie, I blessed him in Farsi.

"Thank you. You remembered me, Mr. Sabeti."

"Yes, you haven't changed, but how did you remember me?"

"I didn't. Your name is in the book." I felt doubly foolish even though he had said it pleasantly. "Do you live in Boston?"

"Yes, just moved here."

"Straight from home, or with a stop in Europe?"

"A year in Frankfurt."

"A short stay, you are lucky. Europe dries the savings." He was right. "Me, I moved here twenty years ago. Thank goodness. What would I do if I had to emigrate at this age?"

He let the pressure off his fingers, and I brought my head up in time to hear him ask about my father. Not a trace of sarcasm. Only an old barber making conversation.

"In prison, unfortunately," I said.

"The Colonel did me a disservice long ago you know." He paused and cocked his head sideways as if to recollect the details a little better. I said nothing. "But I am sorry for him. I hope they let him out soon. Have you got a green card yet?"

He told me a joke about Khomeini and the bead's string attached to his prick. I told him about Germany and being mistaken for a Turk. He laughed and made a V sign at the back of his head. I laughed. We talked for a few minutes about the chances of employment on the 128 beltway, the prime rate, and Haideh's new singing career. We also talked about the optimum tea, a forty-sixty mix of Earl Gray and Darjeeling. Wouldn't let me pay.

I walked out into the Boston winter. Outside, a layer of grimy ice glazed the piles of ploughed snow. The dirty ice had the shine of worn-out cloth. I breathed the air, and each breath felt like a papercut.

THE THIRD REFLECTION: REVENGE

MY BROTHER ON TV. Imagine that. He calls me after eleven years. "Dadi, I am going to be on TV." I don't recognize the voice, but only one person calls me Dadi, short for dadash. It's like bro for brother.

First I get angry. "Two letters in eleven years," I say. "You didn't even put a return address."

"Things have been hairy, Dadash, you know that." I knew that. It felt like I was about to gargle my insides. "So," I say, "what have you done with yourself?" The connection is bad. International call for sure.

"I am a writer."

"A writer?"

My brother a writer. Imagine that. Everyone knew I was smart. Always the best grades in school. "You are gonna be a great engineer," my mother used to say. "You are gonna come back and build fine roads and dams." My mother talked like a washerwoman, like someone who has sacrificed everything for her children. Never worked a day in her life. Nor did my father. "A mind like a Swiss watch." She'd shake her head at my Aunt in cosmic wonder, "not like that no good lying brother of his . . ." and she'd reach across the table to take a whack at him, only, in the nick of time, to remember her nails.

I knew better. Only brothers know better. Sia was smart. Just a different kind of smart. I never did acknowledge it.

"Publish anything?" I ask. The undulations of long-distance noise drown my voice. I think of a tube stuffed with Brillo.

"Rubbish?" His voice comes back with an angry question. "What do you mean rubbish? I am telling you I am a writer."

I have to laugh. "Publish, not rubbish, you oaf," I yell into the mouthpiece. His laugh comes through the acoustic fizzle. First doubtful and then it sails high on a wave of interference. "Have you read any of my books?" he screams. The line goes clear around the sentence. Static free. Parenthesized by a skein of silver noise.

"Books!" My voice elongates the word into an ever-curdling note.

"Yes bookssss. A grand total of three. You have a TV?"

"Of course I have a TV."

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"Do you have cable?"

"Where are you?"

"Watch me on Channel 14 at 11:30. Your brother is going to be on TV."

We talk for a while.

Later, I am excited. I pick up the phone and dial my divorced wife's number in Seattle. Two rings and she's on the line. Now I imagine a chrome-plated stainless steel tube. No static except her voice, high southern shrill. I try to convince myself that it was because of a Green card. Not true. Not at first. It was the shock. The excitement at the willingness of all that flesh. In some things I share my mother's gutter taste.

"Hi, hon," she says. "You taking care of yourself?" Never a note of recrimination. I imagine her standing in the hallway, in her shorts, massive thighs protruding awobble, with Billy, her son from her first husband, on one hip, blowing upwards at the sweaty blond strands of hair stuck to her face. Half of her grimy soles slipped from the worn flip-flops on the cool floor.

"I broke my middle finger today," I say, not really wanting to say.

"You poor baby. Are the Eastern women that tight?" A ripple of laughter. My kind but crude wife. She used to earn her money as a fantasy operator, the type people call for twenty minutes of dirty talk. No one would get more mileage out of seeing her brother-in-law on TV. I feel virtuous, clean. Anyhow I tell her Channel 14, 11:30. I speak with my American stepson and then go out to buy a blank tape.

Sia got the time zone wrong. It's after 2 a.m. The program is called "Portrait of immigrant writers." A tall gangly man with gray hair loose on his brow and a long noble face talks quietly to the camera from a leather armchair. He explains that the show is dedicated to writers who write in a language different from their native tongue. He gives examples of famous writers. One in particular he focuses on: someone with the same last name as Dick, my boss. The man's picture, an old black and white with a wavy border, replaces the host. The host, now out of the camera's eye, begins reading what he thinks to be interesting details. The black and white disappears, uncovering the poor host hunched over the text. He straightens up and gives the date of the author's death as if he had just finished reading a

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children's story. The night's guests are introduced before the commercials. He butchers our family name but apologizes for it while staring into my living room.

I rewind the VCR to make sure it's recording. The host apologizes again, but, in the rewind, he sounds disingenuous. It's the vertical hold pulling at the side of his mouth. I adjust the tracking. I press the record and play buttons together. My braced finger makes it difficult. Before I can see my brother, I endure a late-night record commercial. An elderly gentleman's half bust, in Irish tweed, circled by a soft haze, sings excerpts of his "treasury" of love songs. Every song produces amnesiac nostalgia.

The show returns. The interviewer isn't the host. It's a tape. The interviewer, probably a British anthropology Ph.D. student, with scraggly long blond hair, prematurely bald, asks the questions with native ease. The other man, my brother, answers. My brother wears a brown suit without a tie; the interviewer wears khakis. Khakis indicate how far the West believes a nation has strayed from civilization. Another voice, deep, confident and quiet, superimposed, with a slight lag, gives the English translation. It feels like Jacques Cousteau describing one of his coral reefs.

My poor twice-inverted brother: the electrons mimic his tan. The flat, Turkeman face deposited on magnetic tape, cut, spliced, then refreshed for my eyes from left-to-right, across the tube, at 15750 cycles per second. He has aged into a man. Also piggy-backed on the signal, modulated nicely along with my brother, is the backdrop. A European-style house in Shemiran above Tehran. The mountains, quite close, give all the bearing I need. The two of them sit on the verandah. The interview lasts ten minutes, with one commercial break. The first time around I hear little of what he says. I watch him talk in the background while this other voice dominates. He sounds fragile. A parabolic, strong chest doesn't agree with fragile. Thick chest hair protrudes from his open-collar shirt. The ten-minute interview ends in a flash. So I rewind to listen.

INTERVIEWER: Your book of short stories *Brothers* has just been published in the U.S. Are you pleased with the response?

WRITER: It has been received well. I attribute this to the interest in the Iranian immigrant population, maybe I should say support.

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INTERVIEWER: You make a distinction?

WRITER: It's a suspicious trait of mine. I guess I don't believe the number of books they say have been sold. Almost all are sold in the three metropolitan areas. My recurring nightmare is of all those Iranians who walk into the New York, Washington, or L.A. book stores and buy any available book written by a fellow countryman. All those unread copies, it's enough to give one . . . well, you see my point?

INTERVIEWER: Your book is made up of interconnecting short stories, but it really is a novel. The stories deal with an odd mixture of the modern East and the West. Especially, the plight of the middle-class immigrant.

WRITER: Yes. It's sometimes difficult to use the word "plight" when one sees all those poor Haitian immigrants. A 747 is a pleasanter way of entry than a wooden boat. The problem is that for most Iranian immigrants life was better before they left.

INTERVIEWER: Yet you live here permanently.

WRITER: Well, that's recent. I have just returned from Europe after many years.

INTERVIEWER: Your stories center on two brothers with different possible scenarios. Why the interplay?

WRITER: I lost a brother in the recent revolution. Not a victim: died in the middle of the street from a heart attack. It seemed an appropriate theme. As brothers, we faced many contradictory scenarios: sacrifice, betrayal, hate, love.

I stop the tape, not quite believing what I hear. I rewind. The tape makes a short ticklish sound. I hit START; the head pauses and then with a patient whirl realigns.

WRITER: . . . ther in the recent revolution. Not a victim: died in the middle of the street from a heart attack. It seemed an appropriate theme. As brothers, we faced many contradictory scenarios: sacrifice, betrayal, hate, love.

He says it so convincingly, with the right amount of emotion. Like a brother who has finally accepted a deep loss in his past. A joke, I thought. One of his pranks.

INTERVIEWER: Writers from the Third World are usually political. Your stories don't show a great deal of that. You live

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in charged times and you certainly hold strong views. Why not reflect them in your stories?

WRITER: Writers always feel that they have cornered truth. But we have been wrong so many times. In fiction, we must give our loyalty to the characters, not to political factions.

INTERVIEWER: Are you saying that writers should not attempt to depict the truth, say, about the Holocaust?

WRITER: No. That's not what I mean. I think that fiction should make a stab at the probability of truth. Holocaust is a historical fact. But say if a writer pursued a story line around fashion within a concentration camp, fictional as it may be, the author's seriousness must be challenged. My stories usually describe a fictional situation that could occur with a high degree of probability in a social milieu. That surely is enough social commentary.

INTERVIEWER: One of your stories deals with an older brother taking responsibility for the younger brother's first sexual encounter. It's your only humorous story. The first-time experience of a young man in a brothel turning sour. A universal theme. If I may, I'd like to read a passage:

There the whores, politely referred to as the Kleenex ladies, walked in bath robes on the second-floor balcony. Pulsing red, white, and green neon lights were set on a wall one on top of the other, so that the colors of the nation played over the customers, decorating their shirts with stripes of bright color. The smiling photographs of the young Shah and his sister were customarily placed on each side of the lights, surrounded by gold-painted rococo frames. The woodwork of the frames, simple at the lower sections, culminated in elaborate relief crowns above the head of each glossy figure—all testimony to the patriotism of the city's inhabitants.

I rewind the tape to hear the passage again. That's how I remember it. I never forget how nervous he was at the gate of New City. Tehran's red-light district was constructed so that it could be entered through one gate. It was like a city within a city. At the entrance, a lightly-built policeman with a droopy mustache stood guard against intruding minors. The policeman scared first timers on account of a small, menacing, colorless scar arched the length of his eye in lieu of the eyebrow. It wasn't

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really the scar that frightened the young people. The scar made the other bushy eyebrow seemed raised in an angle of perpetual interrogation. That's what made them nervous. Hard currency easily bridged the difference between a minor and an adult, but a sixteen year old doesn't appreciate easy solutions. So that first time I took him through the Hosseinis' tailor shop, the long way. It was at the opposite end of the official entrance to the city. Few people knew of it.

The INTERVIEWER closes the book and asks: Was it your intention to use New City as a metaphor juxtaposed against the corruption of the Shah's regime? Those last sentences can be construed to mean exactly that. Isn't that social commentary?

WRITER: No, what you just read was simply an accurate description. Any of my countrymen reading that passage wouldn't look for a hidden meaning. What I meant earlier on was that a writer of fiction does not need to put down historical truth. He can make up any situation as long as it's plausible.

INTERVIEWER: Give me an example?

WRITER: In the story "Impotence," an uncircumcised body would have been far less likely to be denied burial in the Shah's era than in today's Islamic government. Had I written that story with the ancien regime as the background, the story's integrity would have been suspect. Take any story line in the book and see if it is less or more plausible in a different environment or regime. But characters can be placed in different situations and their reactions be completely different. Take the Hosseini brothers. In two different stories they are twins, one of whom is deaf and the other mute: in one story they are a couple of bad dentists whom the young protagonist can only tell apart by the level of pain each causes, but in the story you quoted earlier they are tailors cum pimps.

I smile nostalgically. I don't know what Sia's book says, but it was funny in an after-the-fact sort of way. I put the tape on pause and walk to the refrigerator for a nectarine.

The Abrahamian brothers, the local dentists, were real but weren't deaf or mute, nor were they twins. The Hosseini brothers were real and made shirts. The front of their house opened to the outside world and was a legitimate tailor shop. The yard at the back had a door which opened to the New City. There, in the back, Kobra, their sister, conducted the more profitable

business. The arrangement offered plenty of discretion, and was lucrative for the whole family. With the intention of mildly deviant sex, the customer could come away, for a handful of loose change, with one of the brother's cheap and abysmally low-quality shirts like the free-drinks gimmick in Vegas.

Each working house had its own small yard, and this was no exception. Metal folding chairs set up in the courtyards outside provided the informal waiting room for the paying customer. The first-floor windows were covered with the same material from which the Hosseinis made their shirts. Curtains of patched blue, red checks, and gauzy light yellow were glued on the windows. Standard patio furnishings included old, banged up refrigerators with big radios set on top blaring at the customers. In the Hosseinis' house Sia lost his virginity.

I press pause again. The frozen Interviewer melts. He asks: Your stories revolve around two powerful human themes: impotence and revenge. They remind me a great deal of American southern writers. Even in the humorous story we have been discussing, where the stem of the younger boy's watch catches the prostitute's earring, producing the concluding uproar, you take time to focus on the older brother's impotence. You make him wait in the yard where he gets voyeuristic pleasure from his brother upstairs.

I had to stop the machine and rewind again. That's not how it was. I remember every detail down to our waiting number. We entered the shop through the front. The Hosseini brothers, kind-faced men of about forty with droopy eyes, were sitting on a heavy blue metal desk, dangling their legs over the sides. The desk was covered with cheap cloth and the place smelled a little like J. C. Penney. One munched on a sandwich, the other bit into a raw onion which he held like an apple. The one with the onion, the deaf one, asked, loudly, about our pleasure. He spoke a garbled but understandable speech. I did the talking.

The brother with the sandwich quickly transmitted my message in what appeared to be a shorthand sign language. The deaf brother spoke again, directing us to the yard.

Kobra, their sister, the Hollywood stereotype of all Middle-Eastern retired whores, greeted us with the enthusiasm of her deep laughter. Enormous woman. That day she wore a blue negligee; the black, fish-net underwear held visible explosions.

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When she laughed, and it was after almost any sentence spoken to her by a paying client, she threw her head back, placed her small, pudgy hands on her belly and let out a throaty shriek that lasted all of a second.

Sia was sent up with great fanfare. All the customers agreed to let him go first. I sat there next to this man who constantly wiped his face with a white handkerchief: a large Armenian with the reddest neck one could imagine. I had the number after his and had every intention of following my brother.

Five minutes passed before we—that is the dozen or so customers, the door-boy and the Madam—heard a scream. One guy said to the Madam: "There goes a Man to match your girls." I smiled and felt proud, but not in a voyeuristic way.

She gave one of her laughs but followed it with a quick, worried glance upstairs. She said to the Armenian, "Musio, get ready; you are next." Just then a louder scream and a string of insults erupted. Everyone in the courtyard rushed up the stairs: the door-boy first, me on his heels and everyone else behind. The boy flung the door open. Above his arm I caught a glimpse of a young, plump, peasant girl sitting on the bedding screaming. There was blood on the pillow and a great deal more on one side of her face. My brother stood dumb with his trousers around his legs, his red American basketball sneakers protruding at a Chaplinesque angle.

Behind us another scream joined the peasant girl's screeching: Kobra made up for all the different silences her brothers suffered. She hurled her huge body at Sia and both fell on the bed. The peasant girl, seeing the danger, lifted her scream by an octave but flitted out of the way, revealing her breasts to the delight of the crowd. She gave a quick smile: a momentary diversion. The scuffle on the bed continued on the floor next to the bed, Sia underneath and the Madam on top, jammed between bed and wall.

The Hosseinis arrived. The wrinkles and bags under their eyes had somehow pulled themselves up like an overweight person inhaling to tuck the stomach in, and both faces were set in a hard, murderous way. The deaf one spoke in an incoherent jumble of words, each word-ending not quite pronounced and mixed with the stench of the onion. I began the tortuous process of explaining without knowing the explanation. Without warn-

ing the dumb brother slapped me hard, catching me across the face and nose. The inside of my cheek felt like a mix of gum and cookies. I scuffled with them. The crowd jumped in and separated everyone, with the Armenian peeling people off like candy wrappers.

It took a while to restore calm. I still had my number but I could hardly use it. That was my so-called impotence.

My BROTHER-THE-WRITER was saying: Vengeance is often the maturity of impotence. Usually, one causes the other, and the effect is distorted by time. It seems to exist only in humans. It's the luxury of having a memory. Again, one can use the same characters over and over again and they will act differently. I admit my interest in vengeance as a theme, but I think you over-emphasize it. Golchin, my favorite barber, never opts for revenge. And I gave him a fair chance in "Forgiveness."

INTERVIEWER: As a counter argument, let me mention a more direct example from your last story, "Impotence." It concentrates on a TV-show host disclosing details of his brother's sexual impotence on the air as revenge for an episode of betrayal happening in their childhood during a soccer game. Surely there, more than anywhere, you combine these two themes?

WRITER: I guess you could say that. Again, though, I should caution against over-emphasis.

INTERVIEWER: Most writers dig deep into personal experience. You seem to be no exception. Do you find it easier to write about a country that has seen so much recent turmoil?

WRITER: Writers seem to be a decade behind their experiences. So I still write a great deal more about before the revolution and my childhood memories. But the effects of the last ten years will be catching up with me soon.

INTERVIEWER: In your book's first story, called "The Introduction," a writer of a similar book of short stories tries to decipher his own work. He tries to isolate fact from fiction. He traces where he first heard the facts and tries to analyze his thought process through some of the crucial times in his life. I wonder if you could try a similar exercise now.

THE WRITER chuckles: If memory serves me right, the poor writer almost cracked up over what was fact and what was fiction. He never was successful.

INTERVIEWER, smiling, insists: An example would help.

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WRITER: Let me think now. The last story you mentioned can serve as a good example. Elements of truth exist. I told you not to emphasize the revenge element. Let me construct for you what I think is a scenario that closely resembles my version of reality. My brother, a few years before his heart attack, did visit a doctor named Golchin regarding his impotence. Golchin disliked my father. So instead of honoring the doctor/patient relationship, he revealed my brother's problems to a number of people. In a closed society like ours, the neighborhood's awareness of such matters could be devastating. My father and his pride suffered daily blows from the gossip. It gradually drove my father to a certain death. I used TV as a metaphor only on account of my anger at the whispering campaign by the community against my brother and my family. In my stories, I rail often against the whispering culture that existed before the revolution. I would have rather seen it announced on TV than to deal with it as hearsay. My brother emigrated to the U.S. where, as I mentioned earlier, he died in the middle of a street in Boston. You could say, in my fiction, I took revenge by making Golchin emigrate.

I push STOP. My head whirls. The revenge is, of course, on me. Golchin never emigrated. So far as I know he still cuts hair. The telephone begins to ring. I let it. On the fourth ring, I hear the answering machine begin its succession of clicks and clacks. A pause for my message, then my wife's voice echoes through the apartment: "Oh honey never mind your brother," she says, "come pick up the phone. I know you are there . . . I can talk you to sleep."