



My Mother's Black Chador

A selection of short stories by
Mania Akbari

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This book consists of a selection of five stories from the “Stories Without Decoupage” collection, translated from Farsi into English.

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Author: Mania Akbari

Translator: Araz Azarnejhad

Editors: Bronwen Robertson

James Marchant

Cover design and layout: Patryk Les

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Preface

Mania Akbari was born in 1974 in Tehran, Iran. The daughter of schoolteachers, she started painting at a very early age, though her artistic talents would come to manifest in a number of other fields; she has been working variously as a painter, a filmmaker, and is now taking her first steps as a writer. Her career as a painter would start in 1991, and she would go on to exhibit her work on national and international stages before making her dazzling first step into cinema as the star of Abbas Kiarostami's film "Ten". Released in 2002 to widespread acclaim, the film was entered for competition at the Cannes Film Festival in the same year. Akbari was widely praised for her performance, with the film shining a bright spotlight

upon her character's self-perceptions and personal relationships, thereby offering an intriguing insight into the position of women in contemporary Iran.

Two years later, she wrote, directed, and performed in her first feature length film "20 Fingers", which tackled a variety of socially complex issues, from divorce to homosexuality. The film won the 'Best Digital Film' plaudit at the 61st Venice International Film Festival, and served to firmly establish Akbari as a formidable figure in the landscape of Iranian cinema. The film was subsequently screened at more than 40 international film festivals that year, and went on to win a number of further awards. She continued to focus on the creation of visual works in the following years, and between 2004 and 2007 she produced a widely praised collection entitled 'Six Video Arts' which featured at exhibitions from the Tate Modern to

the Locarno Film Festival.

In 2007 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The experience of successfully overcoming her illness pushed her to direct and perform in the film “10+4” (the sequel to Kiarostami’s “Ten”), which quickly re-established Akbari at the cutting edge of contemporary Iranian cinema. In 2010, she built upon the success of “10+4” by releasing the documentary “30 Minutes to 6AM”, which explored themes of revenge, justice and pain in the story of a young Iranian facing execution. Akbari’s films have never shied away from confronting socially sensitive issues and taboos in Iranian society, a characteristic that has never endeared her to state censors. Facing an atmosphere of heightened censorship and political scrutiny in Iran, she was forced to abandon work on her next feature “Women Do Not Have Breasts” in 2011, after which she left the country for Europe.

Today, Mania Akbari has settled in London, and having finished her 2012 film “In My Country, Men Have Breasts”, she is now exploring literature as yet another medium through which she can dissect complex themes of love, sexuality and identity in modern society. Akbari’s collection of short stories entitled “Stories Without Decoupage” was first published by Nogaam in June 2013, in Persian.

Her stories are bold, frank, and adept at seamlessly weaving together topics as varied as politics, sexuality and identity in contemporary Iran. She unflinchingly confronts societal taboos, depicting a number of scenes in these stories that would never pass by the Iranian state censors. Furthermore, Akbari does not hesitate to place herself at the center of her work; she artfully filters her meditations on death, war, family, memory, beauty, relationships and identity through her own lived experiences as

an Iranian woman.

In this collection, Akbari continues her efforts to shatter taboos, challenge conventions, and move beyond the chafing confines of traditional society. We at Nogaam are convinced that she will astonish you with her audacity, her sharp words and her striking imagination.

This book consists of a selection of five stories from the “Stories Without Decoupage” collection, translated into English.

I'll commit suicide

Let me stand in front of you. Please, look at me. Look at my eyes, at my lips. Wait! Quiet! Don't move. Keep calm. Listen carefully to my words. I'm the protagonist of this story. I'm going to hang myself in this train carriage. I'll commit suicide.

This train is so old, it cackles along.

My trainers are white. I've covered my head and my whole body with a black chador. Only my trainers are sticking out, visible. I'll hang myself from the ceiling of this carriage with a thick kenaf rope.

We pass over rivers and mountains, and through

black tunnels. Through this veil covering my face, I see my surroundings in a black haze. I can look at others without them realising they are being watched. This girl sitting in front of me is talking to her cell phone all the time; talking about her clothes, the colour of her underwear and the erotic dream she had last night. In her dream, she's had an affair with a man; embraced and kissed him. And all the time, she's snooping on me, biting her lips and moving her body around as if she is dancing. I'm sitting quietly like a sculpture; the only thing resembling a human is the silhouette of my body.

The girl leaves the carriage and returns with an ice cream in her hand. She takes the ice cream out of its packet and gives it a lick. She's pierced her tongue with a golden ring. Has she really done that? Made a hole in her tongue with a needle and

passed that golden ring through the hole?

Last night, I had a nightmare. Somebody was sitting in front of me. A woman. Her face was white and flat, like a blank page. She had hair down to her nipples. She had a piece of meat in her hand, maybe a chunk from a pig's leg. Flies. Flies perched on the meat and on her face, on that white, flat page. A woman with a face full of flies.

There is a girl sitting in front of me whose hair reminds of that woman in my nightmare. A fly lands on her ice cream. The girl is holding her cell phone with one hand and is holding her ice cream with the other and licking it. I want to reach out my hand from under my chador to wave the fly away from her ice cream. She opens her mouth and takes

a bite, swallowing the fly with her ice cream. "I'm wearing red stockings and black shoes," she says.

Red stockings. They remind me of red millipedes, those millipedes living on the ceiling of my father's house. My father, who, after my mother's death, went to the village of Ahmad Abaad and bought a girl of fourteen. He paid two hundred thousand Tomans for her and brought her home. Narges had red cheeks and a round, chubby body.

I used to hear Narges whimpering every night, saying to my dad "Haji, please, not from behind, the Quran has forbidden it. Don't do that, please, I beg you." And her whimpers would fill the house till sunrise.

The millipedes lived in the ceiling of that very house, the house that had windows facing a big garden with a pond. Narges would sit by the pond wash the clothes. And with what a strong effort she used to do that! I never understood why she cried and wiped her tears off with her sleeves while washing the clothes. I used to sit on the stairs, facing Narges, throwing stones in the pond, the water splashing on her face. I was trying to bring her out of grief, her pain stricken world, but nothing worked.

The millipedes, red like fire, were stuck to the ceiling and wouldn't move at all. I would try scraping them off the ceiling with Narges's broom, the same broom she used to sweep up the leaves that swirled into the garden and carpeted the apple and pear trees when Qom's strong dry winds blew. After sweeping and scrubbing, Narges would cover

the wooden daybed in the yard with a carpet and prepare the waterpipe for dad to smoke.

I was crazy about the “Atash-Gardaan” (fire spinner), which we used to prepare hot charcoal for the waterpipe. When Narges was holding it, I would run to her and beg her to “please, please, for God’s sake, for dad’s sake give it to me, let me do that, ...” as if I was the only one who was capable of doing the task. Finally, I would grab it, spin it in the air and create a galaxy out of it. I would scream with excitement and Narges would laugh at me.

Even with Narges’s broom, I could not remove the millipedes from the ceiling, which meant sleeping with a swarm of millipedes hanging above your

head.

One evening, in the room that had a door facing the yard, Narges spread out a big blanket with a blue velvet cover. Sunlight covered the blue velvet blanket which had a fish painted on it. Beads were spread over its body. The fish was big; it was not a shark, but it was very big, way bigger than Narges or I. Narges was staring at me, as if she had lost her mind. The look on her face scared me and I stepped back, leaning against the wall. Narges, holding a long needle with a piece of blue thread hanging from it, edged closer and closer to me. I don't know why, but I subconsciously hid my hands behind me. In a flash of an instant, I don't know what happened exactly, but I felt a burning sensation in my hand. Narges was holding my hands and it felt as if she was stitching my skin to hers with the blue thread she had used to stitch

the tail of that big fish with. Then after a while the thread started to turn red; it became redder and redder. I was staring at her eyes and she was staring at me.

Suddenly, I saw us lying on the fish. Through Narges' round curvy body I was watching the fish gliding through the waters and heading to the ocean. Narges riding the fish and I was riding Narges. Narges was holding my head and neck tightly with her legs to save me from falling into the water and drowning in the ocean.

This game between me, Narges and the fish went on for days, until all of the beads were completely stitched to the fish. The blanket was then bundled up and was put in the closet. One cold winter

night, Narges took that fish blanket out from beneath the other blankets and covered herself and my dad. Narges slept with my dad under that very fish on which she used to sleep with me, just days before. The fish's mouth was half open and the beads on its eyes were twinkling. At night, when I would go to piss under the tree in the yard, the fish would continuously wink at me with its eyes.

One time Narges ordered me, "pull your pants down and piss here under the tree." She also pulled her clothes down and we began to piss together under the tree, in front of each other. It was after that time that I started peeing under that tree at night. The fish was gazing at me and I was sleepless.

The girl was laughing with a strange sound echoing in the cabin. It felt as if she was not afraid of me at all, not afraid of this black chador, not afraid of this veil. She lay on the bed and took off her shoes. She started chewing her dark green bubblegum frantically; making big bubbles that would pop on her lips, one after the other. I didn't know what to do to make her go away and leave me alone. She took a black notebook out of her bag and started to turn over the pages. She'd had the chance to phone every single one of her friends and acquaintances on this long trip. Just as the train passed a sharp turn, she rolled and fell off the bed and onto my feet. I was flustered, and grasped at her hand from underneath my chador and lifted her quickly. She fell onto me and said "sorry, I panicked." Her bag had flown into the air and all her stuff had fallen out: a toothbrush, a wallet, keys and a few tampons. As she gathered up her stuff, she stared at me and laughed, saying

with an Italian accent: “I hadn’t had my period for a long time. I thought my boyfriend had made me pregnant. I took a test and they confirmed that I was. These doctors, sometimes they aren’t up to the job. I had my period this month and thought I had had a miscarriage. I saw the doctor again and he said, you are not pregnant at all, your period was delayed for a couple of months and now it’s back to normal again.” And then, laughing loudly, she shoved the tampons and her other things into her purse, which seemed way too small for all that stuff.

On sunny days when my dad was out of the house, Narges would stretch a blue plastic rope from the balcony into the yard and fix it to one of the tree’s long branches. She would start thrusting her white cloth napkins into a copper wash pan filled with water. The pan would turn red with blood. Then,

she would pour that red water into the pond and refill the pan with fresh water. She would repeat this action dozens of times. Afterwards, she would hang the white napkins onto the blue rope. The white napkins were full of stains; red blots that, despite her best efforts, had not been removed. It was as if those red millipedes stuck to the ceiling had now stuck to the napkins: rounded, formless and dispersed.

I would lift the napkins with a long stick and shake my stick in the air. The napkins on the head of the stick would fly in the garden, from one side to another, as if the evil ghosts have been awakened; ghosts who would fly over the pond. I would stand near the apple and pear trees and say with a deep voice, "I'm a duck, I've been injured, I've have been shot in the wing, one day a cruel hunter shot his bullet into the air, it broke my

wing and blood trickled down it. With barely any breath left, I landed in this tree. I entered through the window of a room that had a big door. I sat by the lake, in which swam a fish with eyes made of beads. I flattened my wings. A kind woman came and licked my wounds. She sat on my neck and now I'm flying in the air above this garden. Narges would shout: "Stop it kid! They'll get dirty! My hands aren't strong enough to wash those bloody napkins again. They get so dirty. I can't bear the burning and itching anymore." Before dad came back to the house, Narges would collect the napkins, tie them up, wrap them in a flower-pattern bundle, and put them in the closet.

The sound of her scream woke me up.

"What happened?"

“Cockroach!! A cockroach fell off your chador. Eeeeeaaaah, it’s got wings, it’s flying!”

“What a big one!”

“There it is!”

The cockroach landed on the ground, near the chair leg. I got up, held my chador up with my hands, raised my foot, took precise aim at the cockroach, and stamped on it with my trainer. KRRRCH!... The girl quickly took a paper tissue out of her bag and gave it to me. I bent down and wrapped the carcass of the cockroach in that tissue and threw it out of the carriage’s window.

“A Mouse! A Mouse!” I ran to her. She said

we should throw all the bedding into the garden as she had seen the mouse going into the closet. I helped her bring the big mattresses one by one to the balcony. Then, there was that flower-pattern mattress which had a hole on one side. Narges brought her head close to the hole, screamed and stepped aside. I too looked into the hole and saw six tiny mice next to each other, sticking their mouths underneath the belly of a big mouse and suckling their mother's breasts quietly.

Narges was scared and cowered between the mattresses and the black wall of the closet; the wall that had been burnt by fire once and had turned black. That's what dad used to say. Narges sat on the ground, pulled up her blouse and took out her round white breasts with those big pink nipples.

She stared at my eyes. I took a look at the hole on the mattress and at that mother mouse sleeping quietly and apathetically while her babies were suckling her breasts. I turned my eyes from the flowers on the mattress to those big round breasts with those pink nipples. I bent down and touched that round soft skin and gazed at her eyes again. I stuck myself to her body. Narges put her hand under one of her breasts and pushed it into my mouth: “Eat.”

I started sucking. I don't know why but after a while I started biting her breasts. Narges was screaming and she was sweating. She sank deeper into the mattress, and I didn't notice when exactly she passed out, squeezed between the mattress and the closet. I got up and stepped away from her. My body was shaking. A little while after, Narges gradually came around and I ran out to the garden.

I put my feet into the water of the pond. The fish in the pond knew my feet. They would come close and rub their mouths over my toes. And I would sway my toes together with them, especially the fish I had named 'Fire' because it was so red.

The mother mouse had run away, and Narges brought the mattress to the balcony and poured oil from a can onto the baby mice with absolute disregard. I was standing and crying: "Narges! Don't kill them! Don't kill! Let them go! They were just born!" Narges said: "What's the difference, they will grow up too and come into the closet and eat our mattresses and rice sacks, and besides, their shit causes disease."

Narges emptied the oil can into the mattress hole

and the baby mice paddled until they remained torpid and still.

I got used to playing with Narges near the mattresses in the closet. On the wall of the closet, there was a mark of two big hands. I learned later that my uncle had burned himself inside the closet, in front of his mother and sister. The people had frantically tried to save him using water, gunny sacks and clothing, but it was no good. That mark was the shadow of his hands. He had such big hands.

The days passed by and I grew bigger and bigger and bigger.

The girl got off the train and then I was alone in the cabin.

One afternoon, Narges went downstairs into cellar and sat near the tandoor, an oven where we made bread. She started flattening dough pieces and sticking them onto its walls to cook. She used to say there was a big long horned snake lying in the cellar and that they were friends with each other. It's the queen of the snakes. I used to laugh and listen to her stories and delusions. That evening I went down the cellar stairs and went over to the tandoor. The tandoor's fire lit up Narges's face. Her breasts shook violently every time she bent to put the dough inside the tandoor. Her face had turned red from fire's warmth; it was bright and hot. Her scarf was blue and she had piled her hair in a bun on the back of her head under the scarf. Her red and yellow flowery skirt was flattened

around her and swinging. I got close to her. Paying no attention to my footsteps, she continued sticking the dough pieces to the insides of the tandoor. I pushed her back and she fell on the ground. I pulled down my trousers and the underwear that she had made for me out of pieces of my dad's underwear without telling him. I pulled up her skirt. She never wore anything under her skirt. The tandoor was blazing and roaring. I blew my breath into her mouth and took her lips with my teeth and bit her breasts. She always used to smell good, like garlic and onion, and sometimes like mint and basil. Narges was shaking under my body. My breath became fast and I got wet. I threw myself near where the dough and white flour was kept. The smell of burned bread filled the air. The tandoor was smoking. I stared at the ceiling. A black snake with yellow spots was crawling, softly and slowly, across the corner of the ceiling. I jumped up and grabbed Narges' hand and pulled her up

the stairs. She was screaming: “Don’t be scared... Don’t be scared... It won’t hurt.”

I left Narges in the garden and ran for the gardening tools, I took a spade and went down the stairs, lifted it up and slammed it down on his head and body. The snake twisted and fell to the ground. The snake was all cut up but I showed no mercy. The pieces were still alive and moved around. I brought them out to the garden. Narges was screaming and wailing: “The king of the house is dead, we’re finished, the bliss has gone from this house, what a misery, what a catastrophe!”

I lifted the spade and shouted at her: “Quiet! You are insane! You are delusional!”

Dad arrived back and was so happy with what I had done that he called the neighbours and showed

them the mutilated snake and emphasised that this snake could have been a catastrophe for all of the people who lived in that alley, but now it was dead and gone. And then he started flicking through his rosary beads faster and praying louder. He dropped his cloak around his waist and crawled slowly underneath the korsi and fell asleep. The sound of his snoring would break the silence of the house. Narges went under the korsi. And I leaned against the other side of it. I pulled the blanket up. Narges had opened her legs and the red color of burning charcoal reflected on her.

I started to climb up her leg with my toes and finally reached between her legs. Narges was breathing fast and her eyes were lolling back in her head. We both started staring at the bony face of dad and his white beard, which looked even whiter and longer under that black turban. Narges got up and went

quickly to the door and hinted to me with her eyebrows. I stole a look at dad; I made sure he was sleeping heavily. I followed Narges into the cellar, where I had hunted the snake and she used to bake bread.

This time I got completely naked, Narges too. She threw herself onto the flour sacks. I fell on her and was completely lost. Narges had become white. Her hair and eyelashes were full of flour. Her lips tasted like bread. She was laughing at my hair and saying that I looked even older than my father.

Suddenly I saw a shadow. I got up fast, I was dizzy, and was not sure if it was the shadow of leaves and trees swaying on the wall or a thief that

had entered the garden. I put on my clothes and cleaned the flour off my face. I ran out into the garden with an axe. No thief was there and dad was still sleeping under the korsi. I put down the axe and told Narges: “It was just the stormy wind, don’t be scared.”

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of Narges screaming, shouting and begging. I ran into the middle of the garden following the sound and saw my father puffing on his pipe. The closet door was locked and Narges was pounding on the door shouting: “Help, Help!”

Dad was staring at the flowers on the rug and puffing at his pipe. There was smoke coming out of

the closet. I looked at my dad again. He wasn't bothered at all. Flames were rising up from inside. The sound of Narges screaming and wailing wouldn't stop. Like a clumsy fool, I jumped in front of my dad, kneeled and moaned: "Dad! I beg you, I beg you."

Smoke had filled the house and was rising up in search of the sky through the windows and doors. The big wooden door of the closet burned and fell down. Dad was puffing on his pipe rapidly. I ran and took a bucket and started filling it with water from the pond and pouring it on the closet. Red fish jumped out of the bucket and thrashed around in the air before falling into the fire. The water in our pond ran out and the neighbours began dousing the fire with buckets filled with water, clothing and gunny sacks. The fire was extinguished. Narges had vanished among the burnt mattress-

es. The fish blanket had been burned, completely, along with Narges.

We buried her burnt remains. The next morning, my dad swallowed some opium and died in his sleep. We buried him next to Narges. Then snakes invaded the house, sliding through the cracks in the walls and under the doors. The people of the village said the snakes were coming to take revenge because I had killed their queen. They said, your father was right, this house is cursed.

I bequeathed that house and that garden and that empty pond and that burned closet to the snakes and escaped. Little by little, the people around left, fearing the snakes, and the region became devoid of humans.

Over the loudspeaker the police announce, “We must stop the train at the next station. A woman in cabin number 10 has hanged herself.” The train stops. The ambulance arrives. The police take photos. They free the corpse from the rope. They take off the veil and the chador.

The police return to the loudspeaker: “A correction to our earlier report; a man has committed suicide. He was wearing a chador and veil and only his trainers were visible. We mistook him for a woman but realised he was a man when we removed his chador.”

The Aunt

She unfolded the white napkin. It had been made out of old printed fabric, square, twenty centimeters by twenty centimeters. It had embroidered borders; tiny flowers hung from long stems attached to lush green foliage. A name had been stitched around the napkin: “Batool”. In the center of the napkin, there was the picture of an octopus, no, maybe an outline of a blooming flower or a jellyfish. It was dark brown. No, some parts were light and some parts were dark, as if it were cross-hatched with a fine pen or as if they had rubbed dark red paint into the fabric by hand. I’m talking about that printed fabric.

My aunt folded up the napkin and placed it next to

her. She unfolded the next napkin; the embroidery around its edges was different from the previous one. And there was a dragon in the centre, no, maybe a winged bear, flying. A name was stitched to the hem: "Zahra".

I dug my elbows into my mother's legs and craned my neck to see the napkins in aunt's hand better. Mum shook off my elbows and said, "Oi! What are you doing here, kid? Go play in the garden."

I couldn't have been much older than five. I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my skirt and stayed right where I was. My aunt showed my mum the napkins from each of her daughter-in-law's consummation nights, one by one. The name of each bride was stitched near the dried stains of blood in the centre of the napkins: Khanoom, Maryam, Narges, Zahra and Batool. Auntie had five sons who all had married within two years of one another and after the weddings, she had lovingly bun-

dled up her brides' napkins secreted them away in the closet. The embroidery on Narges's napkin was damaged; the napkin was full of dried blood. My aunt grinned gleefully, shaking her head, and said excitedly: "We took this one to the hospital that night, the doctor stitched her up. She was badly torn."

I got up on my knees and stared at the napkin, but no matter how hard I looked I couldn't see any tears, ruptures, or grooves.

When my aunt was younger, her husband smoked so much opium that he died. After that, my aunt became extremely religious and would wake her five sons up at five in the morning to pray. Her daughters-in-law used to wear flowery chadors with colourful sleeves, so that, when they were at dinner, and when they stretched their arms to reach

out for the saffron rice platter, Ebrahim couldn't see Esmaeil's wife's arm and Esmaeil couldn't see Ali's wife's arm and Ali couldn't see Masha'allah's wife's arm and Masha'allah couldn't see Mojtaba's wife's arm. All of the brides used to live with auntie in her house. The house had a big garden with a pond full of fish in the center. The rooms were arranged like geranium pots around the pond and when my aunt was distracted, I would jump into the pond and start hunting the fish with a ladle. Afterwards, I would wait to go to the hamam. My aunt would take my hand and, together with her daughters-in-law, we would head towards the hamam holding our bundles of toiletries. The brides would get naked joyfully, wrap their embroidered, lace-attached towels around their waists, let down their hair and scuttle on their tippy toes towards the bathing pool.

My aunt would sit in the centre and Batool would

apply skin-whitener to the washcloth and scrub auntie's back with it. Zahra would rinse her. Narges would prepare soap foam and Maryam would exfoliate the soles of my aunt's feet with pumice. Sometimes, the brides would have a water fight with each other. They would splash water at each other and laugh. They would wash my aunt and then Batool, with her big firm round breasts and her white body, would wash Zahra and prepare the soap foam and pour it over her head. Narges was thin and skinny and my aunt would shake her head and say: "See what a nice body Batool has, my poor grandchildren will be so skinny! Eat more food and fatten up a bit."

The daughters-in-law would start laughing and Narges would reply: "Dear Mother, it's genetic. My mum gave birth to eight children, but she always remained slim." And auntie would leave it at that.

That day in the hamam, my aunt told Maryam, “Lie down here, lie down.” Maryam lay down on the hamam’s floor in front of her, shaking with fear. My aunt told her daughters-in-law to step aside and she thrust her head beneath Maryam’s towel and buried herself between her legs pressing firmly down on Maryam’s belly with her hands: “Open your legs.” Maryam’s scream echoed around the hamam. All of the daughters-in-law had dropped their heads and didn’t say a word. My aunt emerged from beneath the towel and said to Maryam, “You’re three months pregnant.”

The brides started to cheer joyfully. But my aunt got angry and beat Maryam over the head with the big red pan they were washing with: “Didn’t I tell you to prevent this? To take the pill? And besides, you’ve already had two girls. That’s your fate. You can’t do boys. This one is also a girl. Don’t make

my son's life worse than it already is.”

I leapt up from the sofa in the psychiatrist's room. The therapist said: “Why did you get up? You still have time, go on.”

“I don't know, I really don't understand why I have to go to therapy sessions in order to get my residency permit. What kind of rule is that?! And I really don't know why I told you the stories about my aunt.”

“Lie down, you still have time, go on.”

I laid down and continued.

All of her sons had beards. They were vehemently religious, constantly seeking God and the truth. At night they would sit around and talk about Khomeini, religion and faith. They were fanatical supporters of the Leader. They used to wear long-sleeve t-shirts with three-centimetre collars and

plastic slippers produced by the Melli Shoe Company. It was frowned upon if someone tucked their shirt into their trousers, so they left theirs hanging. They held rosaries and whispered prayers. Each of them was the head of some government department with a strange name: Head of the Ideological Department, Chief of the Political Department for the Port of Jassk, the Department for the Health Assistance of NAJA (the Islamic Republic of Iran police force), or the head of Safety and Security Organization of the Qom Seminary.

I remember when they blindfolded me with a piece of black rag. It took some time for my eyes to adjust to the light after it was removed. Everything was blurry. I saw a man in the corridor. He was wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, hanging out of his trousers, and he wore plastic Melli slippers. He had tidy hair and a long beard. It dawned on me that he was my cousin. I ran to him: “Cousin,

cousin.”

He turned towards me, but he was not Ali, nor Esmaeil, nor Ebrahim, nor Masha'allah, nor Mojtaba. He shouted: “Where is Mrs. Haqiqat? What's this prisoner doing here? What's this mess here? Who has removed her blindfold?”

I don't remember what happened afterwards. I just remember lying down on a bed and having some woman bend down to look between my legs and examine me. Then, they locked me in a room. Well it wasn't a room exactly. There was just enough space to stretch out your legs. That night, I heard a strange grunting noise edging closer to my cell. Whoever they were, I don't know why they were breathing like that. They opened the cell's metal door. The light, coming through the door, didn't allow me to figure out if it was a man or a woman. I crawled to the wall and cowered in the corner. The person came in and closed the

cell door. The sound of their heavy breathing still echoes in my mind. It felt as if he or she was having difficulty breathing, as if they were choking. Suddenly, they pulled up my skirt and put their big hand over my mouth. He had a round face. He didn't have a moustache, but he had a beard on his chin that looked like the skin of a chicken. I don't know why, but it felt like there were no bones in his body. Boneless. His body looked like a heavy piece of meat and he smelled like meat too. He had big sagging breasts. In a brief instant he tore aside my underwear and shoved his finger deep into my vagina whispering in my ear: "Now you can be executed."

He hurriedly stepped out the cell and slammed the door. I don't remember how I felt at that moment. I looked at myself apathetically. I touched my legs and they were drenched in blood. And there were no napkins for me to wipe myself up with and look

at to see what shape I'd get, what picture. Would I get a jellyfish or a flying bear.

The psychiatrist said: "Your time is over, get up."

"Why did I cry so much? I got lost. How long should we continue these sessions for?"

"Until there are no more problems."

"May I say one thing?"

"Go ahead."

"All of my cousins were assassinated by the agents of this government. My aunt died of grief after losing her sons. And the daughters-in-law all left and got married again."

"Your time is up".

"Let me tell you one more thing. I want to hold an exhibition in London, an exhibition of white

square napkins, all with strange magical figures on them. The shapes are formed from the blood of brides on their consummation night. I will stitch their names around the napkins and embroider the napkins at sides and then put them in white frames, in a glass box. I want to name the exhibition When Winged Bears and Jellyfish Find an Aunt.”

“Your time is up.”

My Mother's Black Chador

Red.

Not a red curtain. A red curtain reminds me of my mum's red bra hanging from the radiator in her bedroom.

Tap... Tap...

Turaj, you always loved to have sex with me when I had my period and I hated the moment when I had to wash the blood off my body in the bathroom. The wet red bra was still dripping.

“No, I don't want a white curtain in our bedroom.”

White.

Good... so dear Ava, you don't like white either.

Click! Aah, it's Turaj again, clicking his neck.

White reminds you of your dad's white underwear. They were always old and pale, and the holes in them got bigger and bigger day by day. His old loose penis sagging down between his legs peeked out when he was sitting on the couch. And you would start entertaining and distracting him, trying to keep him there because you wanted to stare at his penis. You also drew that scenario for me a few times. Do you remember how many times you went to therapy sessions to figure out why you're obsessed with these old men?"

But Turaj, finally I discovered the mystery behind it. My relationship with old men and that level of obsession I had with them, originates from that moment and that point. It all started with my dad's withered penis sticking out from beneath his shorts

alongside his weak legs. It was like a kitten lying quietly on his legs and sleeping.

Click...

“Come on!.... You used to enjoy it too and laugh. You used to love those old underwear and those loose saggy shorts.”

I had my fingers on Touraj's chest, fidgeting with the hairs. So, the white color wouldn't do either.

“How about a blue curtain for the room?”

Blue.

“Nope... you don't like blue either. Do you remember you used to tell stories about those nights you used to go and lie down with the boy from next door on the rooftop, embracing each other? You would stare at the blue sky for a long time, until it was full of stars. The funny thing was that

your parents would always find you with that little prince and beat you so badly... But you were so stubborn that they just couldn't tame you, you wild thing. What about brown?"

Brown.

I'd come down with the measles. I woke up in the middle of night. My body was burning up. I saw a man standing in the dark wearing my dad's brown suits and his hat. He had no face. A man without a face. I stood up. I reached out my hand to switch the light on. I was shaking. The light came on. After that night, I saw that man in my dreams over and over again. He was wearing my dad's clothes. One night, I ran out of my room. I stood behind the door of my dad's bedroom. That faceless man was standing behind me, I hurriedly opened the door and saw my mother with her naked sagging breasts, sitting on top of my dad and dad was moaning. I didn't understand why she

was doing that and I jumped on her: “You murderer, you murdered my father, you murdered him.”

Mum wrapped herself up in a white bed sheet and crawled to the side of the bed; dad covered his chest with the leopard-print blanket. I threw myself into my dad's arms and began to cry: “Dad, Dad, help me! That man is following me. He is wearing your suit, look! He's right behind me, that faceless man.”

Touraj kissed me on the neck, and I felt his arms embracing me from behind: “Green. What about green?”

Green.

Green is the color of my doll's eyes. One night, I dug out her eyes with my finger and shoved them into my plastic bat's face. I also extracted the bat's wings and stuck them to the back of my doll. Whis-

tling musically, I got on my magic broom and flew away. Through those old loose underwear I flew off to another world. I landed on a big mountain. My doll was flying. My bat was sleeping in my arms. We used to sleep to dad's lullaby: Me, the bat, the doll and my dad.

“Gold, what about gold?”

Gold.

There were golden taps in the bathroom. The warm-water tap was fashioned like a lion's head. The cold-water tap was the same but had two extra lion cubs. One time, a friend said, “Let's steal these taps and sell them, we'll get rich.” We tried with all our might to take them out, but we couldn't. Anyway, there are other stories about those lion-taps. One of those old men that we talked about before used to lift me up and put me on that black marble cabinet near the taps and push his penis slightly

into me. Moving back and forward... The golden lions would start swinging with me. Sometimes I would see two lions and sometimes three. And sometimes, together with the reflection in the opposite mirror, I could see eight golden lions. Upon hearing the sound of us breathing, they would roar. I would shout, "Don't! I have a tampon in!" But he pushed his penis into me and said, "But I don't feel anything there." And I hoped it might find its way out while I was pissing. Then he laid me on the sink and washed me.

Some time after this, while pissing, a single slight push resulted in a quantity of blood being thrown into the toilet, with a placenta attached. I ran and called the old man, telling him that I had just miscarried his child. The old man came immediately.

He fished the embryo out of the toilet using a strainer and wrapped it in a piece of rag. We ran to the hospital. We put the bundle on the desk in front of

the doctor. The doctor unfolded the rag delicately. Then he fell off his chair laughing: "It's a tampon, not an embryo. And this cord, it's not an umbilical cord, just a thread hanging from the tampon."

Ding dong.

Another burst of laughter from the doctor.

Ding dong.

Ding dong.

I woke up suddenly. The sunlight streaming over my chest. Wow, how pleasant it was to have no curtain on the window.

Ding dong.

"Who is it?"

"George, the builder."

“Hi George.”

“Hi, the ceiling downstairs is dripping, I thought it might be coming from your kitchen. Can I take a look?”

George bent down, thrust his hand under the cabinet next to oven and then showed his wet hand to me. I stuck my face to the ground and looked beneath the cabinet. A small golden tap with a lion head was hiding in there and water was dripping from its mouth.

Tap tap...

I had just given birth to a baby, a boy. My breasts ached. The milk dripped from them. Tap tap. I had a fever.

My mum used to say, “I should milk you”. My son couldn't take my breasts into his mouth because my nipples were so tiny. Mum used to say

that she should suck them so they become bigger, so they become so big that they protrude from my body. Mum would sleep in my arms, put her head in my hands and start sucking my breasts strongly. She used to put a glass on the table and she would spit the milk into it. And then she would repeat the whole act over and over again. My mum's hair looked black and gold in my arms. Her eyes were black and her face stood out. She would close her eyes and start sucking and then spitting into the glass. But after a time, there was no milk anymore, and she began sucking blood! The glass turned red.

My son would smoothly and quietly take the breast into his mouth. Not my breast, the breast of another woman in the neighbourhood. Then we would tap him on the back and he would belch and fall asleep, quiet and sweet.

I let out a belch from last night's drink. I wanted

to sleep, smooth and quiet, but the light through this window wouldn't let me. I took my mum's black chador out from the bundle of clothes and started to cover the window with it using nails and a hammer.

Black, black.

I lay under the blanket, that leopard-print blanket. It was as if the leopard was lurking in the dark, hunting a deer.

My breasts.

Tap... tap...

That golden tap under the cabinet.

Tap... tap...

That red bra on the radiator.

Tap... tap...

A Letter to Saalehi

Only the collar of your white shirt and the glistening edge of your sleeves were visible in the dark. It was absolute pitch darkness. The sound of dogs howling in the dark was echoing in that old Peykan car of yours. You put your hand on the gear knob and I put my hand on yours. You said, “Your hand is so hot! You’ve got fever.”

The wind was blowing through gaps in the car and touching my body. I rubbed my legs together feeling cold. You were right. I had got a fever.

Hungry stray dogs were jumping around the car, opening their jaws behind the shields and snoring like wild wolves. You said: “Don’t worry, the doors are locked.”

Your body was so hot I could feel you sweating on my body. I didn't realise when exactly you put your legs between mine. Now I had three legs in front of my car seat. The legs twisted around each other and soon they became four. You pressed your face against my cheek. Your breath smelled like Bah-man cigarettes. You had promised me hundreds of time to shave, but you never did. Your stubble scratched my face, and then my ear and my neck. I had a close-up view of your curly hair and next to it a view of a stray dog barking wildly behind the windshield.

You put your hand underneath my long skirt and smoothly clutched it. Now my naked legs were touching your rough black cotton trousers. The sound of your belt's buckle was drowned out by the barking. I was bathed in sweat. My knees were shaking, hitting each other and I could hear my bones rattle against each other. You opened my

legs and held my hands tightly. You scratched my breasts and then moved your hand down to my belly and navel. Sweat was dripping down your nose and in my eyes. You grasped my hair and whispered in my ear with intoxicated eyes, “Don’t shout, please, just don’t shout.” I was biting my lips and your lips had become bloody with my blood. You put your hand there for me to clench down on and I pressed your hand with my teeth until you shouted. The car was shaking; the dogs howling even louder than before.

Torpid and exhausted, you lay on me as if we both were dead. Through my eyelashes, I saw a light. It was getting stronger and stronger. It became so bright and I told you, “Get up. There’s a car getting close to us.”

You leapt up and pulled up your pants so fast. Two

men with guns in their hands got out of the car. They shot two bullets into the air so the dogs ran away. I pulled my skirt down hurriedly and cowered on the car seat.

One of those men knocked on the windshield and said: “Why are you shivering sister? Is there anything wrong?”

You got out of the car. I don't know what you told them and what you showed them for them to leave us respectfully. You switched the car on and pressed down on the accelerator and we headed out on the road. Somewhere along the way, you took off your jacket and covered my shoulders. I had put my arms around me and was looking at the road. We reached the town and you parked the car in front of a taxi center.

I'd gotten used to your voice. You'd been interrogating me for one year and I really liked to study

your face precisely. I had gotten used to you, to your voice, to your repetitive questions, to your silence, to your tone, to your illusions. All the time I spent in that cell, I used to think only about you. What I could tell you to possess you.

You had wanted to send me for execution many times, but each time you forgave me. I was waiting for you everyday you know. Everyday. Don't take it for granted. If someone would interrogate me in your place, I wouldn't answer them and I would say, "I will only talk to him." I had named you "him".

I opened the car door.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"You can call me Saalehi."

"I'll call you Saaleh."

I didn't feel like getting out of the car, I just put one foot out on the ground, and started to look straight ahead. The cars were whizzing by hurriedly. A heavy rain began. You turned on your windscreen wipers. I got into the car again and closed the door. You drove a few meters backwards to take the car back into the dark.

“Why don't you get out?” you said calmly.

“Take me back to the place I was...”

You were shocked, turned backward to me and said, “Are you crazy!? You're free! Go! Your mother is waiting for you.”

I grinned. My tears made my lips taste salty:
“When can we meet again?”

I used to hear you everyday, for seven, five, three

hours each day. You're the only one who knows me this much, even better than myself. You've seen my fear, you know all about my nightmares and my pain. You know what I would say when I got hungry, how I would cry after being in the white room and how I would brutally write down my friends' names, people's names, relationships and secrets on a white paper, betraying them. You know what color I turn when I confess and how ugly I look when I put that blindfold on my eyes. You've seen how my lips delight and how my teeth sound while rubbing against each other. You know how my lips crack when I don't eat. You know how my eyelashes got wet and how my feet just wouldn't work when I wrote my friends' names down on your paper. You know how I wet my pants. You know how I look when I get very slim. Where could I go?

Where can I go? My mother is not waiting for

“this” Zahra any more. Take me back with you. Come with me or take me with you.

I saw my skirt; it was wet. I took my hand underneath my skirt; it was full of blood. I smelled my hands; they smelled like when my mother used to buy chickens with the credit notes she had and put them on the cabinets in the kitchen. I would take the chicken, put my hand into the chicken's belly, hold them under the tap and wash them. Afterwards, my hands used to stink for a long time. My mother would cut a piece of lemon for me with that black knife and say, “Clean your hands with lemon juice; it will wash away the smell of meat.”

I asked you to get out of the car and buy me some lemons. Once more, you accepted a request of mine, got out and came back with a sack of lemons. You took out a knife from your pocket and cut into a lemon. I started to rub the lemon on my hands and fingers, and you laughed...

I washed my hands and fingers with lemon juice. Today, London's rain reminds me of that powder-like rain in the north of Iran that used to land on our clothes like dew. Your son has aimed his mouth, open toward the sky, to fill it with water. Then he closes his mouth, swallows the rainwater and says, "Aaah, I was thirsty," and he repeats this act over and over again.

I have named my son Saleh. He always asks me questions and I still confess.

"Mum, what color is god? Where is he hiding? Where is his house? Mum, why have humans got different skin tones? Mum, which one's stronger, heaven or earth? Mum, why don't elephants fly? Why don't angels live in cities? Mum, why do they put images of angels in churches, but not in mosques? Mum, why does the sun melt my ice-

cream?”

And he just asked yesterday: “Why are ants weaker than dinosaurs?”

I confessed: “The dinosaurs are extinct my son, but the ants have lived on, now which are stronger?”

My Name is Cat

You put your hands on my belly. My belly is cracked, withered and sagging. I've been pregnant only once; I remember my belly had peaked like Mount Damavand. It itched so much and I would scratch its skin with my nails. My skin would turn a strong shade of red. Later, those red scratched spots started to crack. My baby girl weighed four kilos.

Now my belly is totally flat, but a piece of dead skin, like the testicles of a sheep, is hanging from me and swaying. I can't believe you touch this sagging piece of dead skin and get this excited. You're so strange! You actually bite and kiss this piece of withered skin!

I tried to stick myself to you from behind, took your hand and lead it slowly to my breasts. But you pushed my hand back and put your hand on my belly again. You put your hand right on the point I didn't ever want you to see, neither in the dark, nor in the light. This quarrel went on until you finally whispered in my ear, "I like it, it turns me on. It reminds me that there was a time you were pregnant and gave birth to a little girl. This is a belly of a mother."

You're so strange!

I calmed down and threw myself gracefully into your arms. You pressed your nose close to my armpit; I squeezed down my arms. I didn't believe my body smelled nice under that chador after walking in the rain. You opened my arms stubbornly and took your nose again to my armpit and touched the hair there with your face.

You whispered, “How nice that you don’t smell like perfume and deodorant! How nice that your body smells like the natural scent of a woman! A wild woman under a chador.”

I felt more relaxed and let myself loose. You stretched your tongue towards my toes, and I quickly curled them up, laughed and said, “No, that won’t turn me on.”

You tickled my feet briefly, but they were probably senseless after hours of standing in those high-heeled shoes and black Parisian socks near the street, and they surely stank. You said you always loved foot odor and that when you were a kid you used to take off your socks, throw them somewhere and then start smelling your feet and laughing.

Now I was feeling totally free. I had become sure that on this luxury golden bed, with that luxury

lamp above my head, I could easily throw myself into your arms. You had a strong body. You twisted my legs around your body and I stared and stared at that luxury lamp. The lamp had a figure of Nasseredinshah on it. He, with his thick wide moustache, was swinging among hundreds of tulips and gazing at me. The noise of the cars outside was disturbing us. You got up and closed the window. I took a look at you. I knew you. You were no longer a stranger to me. You got close to my face and you had a deep strange look. I ran my hands through your beard. It was soft and smooth like baby hair. How soft your dense black beard was: “I’ve never shaved my beard with a razor-blade, I just keep tidy with scissors.”

I laughed and kissed your beard. Your mouth, your face, and your body all smelled like rosewater. It reminded me of the days my mother used to cook “Sholezard”. I laughed so much that I fell off

the bed. You took my hand and lifted me up. You embraced me and kissed my breasts. My breasts were so big that I felt shy, but you said you loved big sagging breasts, and that having big breasts was the sign of being a real woman. So I proudly stuck them to your back. You got up and left the bed. I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror. I grasped my sagging belly and then I held my breasts up with my hands. Ah, I feel comfortable now. I wasn't consumed with thoughts of plastic surgery. I laughed and jumped on the bed happily.

You came back holding an egg in each of your hands. You licked me with your lips and rubbed your soft beard on my body. You began to push an egg into me slowly, softly... I was shocked. I thought you were crazy. The egg was cold because it had been in the fridge. You liked that game. You kissed me and then asked me to sit on my knees, cluck, and lay the egg like a hen. I sat

cross-legged, clucking loudly and tried to lay an egg: Clack! The egg dropped onto the ground and you laughed excitedly like a five-year-old child. And I repeated this act over and over again.

It was almost morning when we fell asleep. At that point, I had come to believe that you were a strong man, my saviour, and that you could save me. We woke up around noon. My black hair was draped over your chest; we laughed together. I didn't usually like to talk before brushing my teeth. However, you had pressed your face to mine and were talking loudly. I didn't open my mouth. I was just answering you by gesturing with my head. You were continuously asking me questions and wanted me to answer, looking right into your eyes.

You were washing my body under the shower. You filled your mouth with water and sprinkled it at my face, like we were kids. With a washcloth, I started rubbing your back, your feet, and your

legs. You took the washcloth from me and washed your penis with it. You dried my hair gently with a towel. You brought the hair dryer and said: "It's cold out, you might catch a cold." You started to dry my hair, running your hands through my hair. Sometimes you blew the hair dryer on my face; I screamed and you laughed.

You put the coffees out on that big gold table. The chair was so heavy I couldn't pull it back to sit on it. You did it for me. You took some loaves of barbari bread out of the freezer and put them in the oven. The smell of toasted bread, made me really hungry. Like kids, we were sitting and waiting eagerly for the bread to toast. I followed your hands into the kitchen, empty, and then coming back again full of things for us to eat. Honey and marmalade, cheese and walnuts, cream and bread and tea and coffee. We ate and drank everything. How hungry we were and we didn't even know!

I helped you to clear the table. Then, I sat on one of those couches; I didn't feel good about those heavy couches imposing their weight on those valuable soft smooth hand-made rugs produced in Tabriz.

The small TV screen switched to the snow pattern and the movie was cut short. My face was wet with tears. As the movie stopped, I burst out crying in that dark windowless room. And I said, "Why did you stop it? It's not finished yet. Why don't you show me the end of the movie, the story isn't over yet..."

They blindfolded me with a rag. A rough manly voice said, "Tell me, what happened after that?"

You put three packs of banknotes on that golden table, put your jacket on and said without looking at me, "Give this money to your landlord; it will be enough for two years. Don't stand on the street corners anymore."

I got up and put the banknotes in my bag. Through the half-opened door, I saw a big shaggy black cat sitting on the bed and looking at me. I went to the room and lifted up the cat. It was soft and smooth. I came out of the room with the cat and said, “May I take this cat with me?” You came to me and ripped the cat harshly out of my arms and said, “No, I’ll give you ten more banknotes if you want, but no, not this cat.”

I screamed and begged you, “ Please, I want to take it as a token to remember you by.” You held the cat above your head and I jumped up to grab it, but you were so tall I couldn’t reach it. You took my hand and said, “Wait, write down your address and tomorrow I’ll send you ten cats.” I hung from your neck and said, “You promise?”

“I promise,” you said. I wrote down my address hurriedly and went to the door. “What’s your name?” I asked you before closing the door and

leaving you behind. You laughed and said, “Cat.”

I laughed and said, “And my name is Fish.”

I closed the door and went away.

“You didn’t show me the movie until the end, you stopped it.”

My voice was stuttering like an old woman: “I swear to god I didn’t know. I didn’t know what I was doing. I was standing in the rain wearing a chador. He arrived with his car and I cried and begged him to take me with him. I don’t know anything about this man. Why are you doing this to me? Will you tell me who he is? What’s his name? Why have you put a camera in his room?”

They took off my blindfold and again, in front of me, stark white papers to fill up with my confessions. I wrote, “There was a man, with black hair, a deep voice, languid eyes and long eyelashes. He

was tall. One night, one night in the rain, a woman cried and begged for that man to take her with him. And she didn't know she was going to act in a movie in which the cat doesn't hunt the fish, but both the cat and the fish are hunted.”