

Title: The Curtain

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Chapter 1

The Mothers And Their Suitcases

The last few times we spoke on the telephone my mother would cry; she told me that she wanted to see me one more time before she died. Since I fled my home country, I had never been back; it was impossible.

My mother had once visited me in Amsterdam fifteen years ago, together with my father. Their trip had inspired me to such an extent that I wrote a handful of short stories as well as my first Dutch-language novella, *The Journey of the Empty Bottles*.

She wanted to come over one more time, but to my mind that was irresponsible and my fear was not unfounded. She was quite advanced in age now, and vulnerable; I feared the same would happen to her as what befell my old friend Naser's mother. Two years ago he had invited his elderly mother to visit him in the Netherlands. It was a tiring journey for her because she had to travel for six hours in a car to Teheran, had a lengthy wait at the airport before spending another six hours on a plane to the Netherlands. She then had to queue for a long time at security and passport control, and wait for her suitcase. And all of this while she was trembling with tension to see her son, daughter-in-law and children one last time.

Almost all immigrants' elderly mothers collapse due to the long journeys and tremendous stress.

Clutching a colourful bunch of tulips, Naser met his mother at Schiphol Airport and took her home. They did not get there until nine o'clock in the evening. The poor woman had been on the road for more than twenty-four hours. They dined in an atmosphere of happiness and

joy. The aged mother opened her suitcase and handed out the souvenirs she had brought with her. The suitcases are a source of worry, it would be extremely painful for the mothers if the cases went missing somewhere along the way. How could these mothers visit their children and grandchildren empty-handed?

My friend's elderly mother sat up late into the night talking about the family, the death of her husband, the neighbours and the old grocer's wife. It was one o'clock in the morning by the time Naser helped her up the narrow stairs. In the spare bedroom he turned on the nightlight for her, placed a glass of water on her bedside table, tucked her in and told her where the toilet was. He put away her suitcase, switched off the lights, and went into his own bedroom.

The following morning he woke a little earlier than usual, calmly went downstairs, made tea for his mother and waited to read the newspaper until she woke up. He pricked his ears every so often, but did not hear anything upstairs. Might his mother be sleeping longer because of the time difference? In the end he went upstairs and called quietly from behind the door: 'Mother, the sun is high up in the sky. Are you awake?'

But no, his mother did not respond. He knocked on the door for a second time; 'Mother, I made tea a while ago, it'll be undrinkable now you know.'

Again, no response. Fear set in. Naser gently opened the door. His mother was lying in bed peacefully and she had had enough, never wanted to wake up again.

My old mate is a sensible man, he knew his mother had died and that he should not panic. He took his time, sat next to her and cried silently. He then alerted his wife, who had just gone to work. Next he rang his GP and told him the whole story. The GP called round and confirmed his mother's death.

If this had happened in Iran, Naser would have immediately alerted the family and neighbours. Close relatives, friends and neighbours would have arrived and everything else would have happened of its own accord according to tradition. The deceased would be taken to the mosque by the neighbours in a casket, and later everyone from the local area would come to the burial ground.

But the Dutch GP immediately called the police, who, for their part, contacted border control and the fire brigade. The dead body had to be removed for an autopsy.

My old friend was still sitting heartbroken next to his dead mother when an enormous red crane from the fire brigade drove up the street. Two firemen in uniform, wearing gloves and

masks, appeared in the air, behind the window of the spare bedroom. They gestured to Naser to open the window wide. He had no idea what was happening and called: 'Why'?

He had to move aside, the body was taken out via the window and his dead mother stayed in a cooling compartment in the mortuary before Naser was allowed to send her back home in a casket.

I did not want any of this for my elderly mother. So I came up with another plan, so that she would not have to make the long journey to the Netherlands.

Chapter 2

Something Else Was Up

My youngest sister had told me that my mother's dementia was deteriorating more quickly than expected, that all of a sudden she was no longer able to find her way home: 'You should see her soon, otherwise she won't recognise you anymore.'

I thought it would be best if I met my mother in one of the countries neighbouring Iran for which no visa was required. I thought of Turkey, Tajikistan, Armenia, Georgia, but my wife suddenly said: 'Let's go to Dubai. It's a forty-minute flight for your mother. Besides, my cousin and his family live there. In view of your mother's condition, it's good that it's a place with friends or family.'

But I did not want to go to Dubai, I had an aversion to the city. I found it an artificial society with a fake culture, a sandpit without history, a place without its own language, literature, music or theatre. The city always reminded me of artificial plants and plastic flowers. I had been there twice because my wife's cousin lived there, whom I had known when I was a student in Iran. He was now working in Dubai as an estate agent.

'Come, come over, let's be together for a while since you can't go to Iran,' he would always say when he phoned. 'Leave those books aside, how long are you going on to carry on writing, take a break, otherwise we'll get old and won't feel like anything anymore.'

During my first visit I could not see anything positive in it; only the warm sun made up for it a little. I saw a large number of companies, buildings, enormous cars, immeasurable supermarkets, British, Germans, immigrants, sheiks, McDonalds, Gucci bags, expensive belts and perfumes, Starbucks, mosques, big Rolls Royces, estate agents, manual workers, Thai

women working as child minders, Russian whores, Iranian and Iraqi millionaires and rich Saudis who wanted to enjoy their money in the freedom of that country.

The second time was another visit to my wife's cousin. It was during the global economic crisis. And Dubai found itself in a precarious situation. The country's stock exchange had plummeted so low that it looked like it might never recover. All the country's economic activity had stopped, no new skyscrapers were being built, and the prestigious national metro project was delayed and could not be completed in time. Because of the slump in the housing market, hundreds of project developers went bankrupt and thousands of Iranians, Iraqi, Pakistani and Saudi who had bought apartments off-plan did not get their money back. The small entrepreneurs from neighbouring countries who had invested in Dubai left their expensive cars at the airport car parks and fled the country in order not to have to pay their debts.

Using borrowed billions from Abu Dhabi, Dubai managed to get its economy moving again. The Emir of Dubai even thought up a new department for his cabinet and appointed a Minister for Happiness. He was tasked with making Dubai a cheerful and relaxing city.

Under these circumstances I arranged a brief trip to Dubai to meet my mother before it would be too late and she would no longer recognise me. We would see if I would be proven right that in fact it was not a suitable place for such an important meeting.

Thus I travelled to this emirate for a third time.

What made the decision easier for me to go to Dubai after all was that there was a special kind of travel agency in Teheran that would arrange the entire trip for you. They even had a specific service for elderly parents who wanted to meet their children in Dubai. You paid and they did the rest. They transported the parents from their house to the airport, carried their suitcases, put them onto special transfers and escorted them to their seats on the plane. When the parents had landed at Dubai airport, employees of the same travel agency picked up the travellers and accompanied them outside, where a comfortable minibus awaited them. They helped the parents into the vehicle and took them to the hotel that had been booked for them.

It was ideal, all my worries gone.

Another service these travel agencies offered was a complete insurance package. Elderly clients were insured against all kinds of diseases and accidents. If the client died, according to Iranian tradition, he or she would be transported instantly to the desired burial ground; all costs were included.

I could not wish for anything better.

My wife arranged everything via her cousin. A Persian-Dubai travel agency would make sure my mother was taken to Dubai.

And then I suddenly thought of my sister. I wanted her to come as well.

Chapter 3

My Sister And My Persian Debut

My father was deaf-mute, I have written extensively about him and his life in my book *My Father's Notebook*. I was my parents' first child and was not born for myself, but for my father, or rather my mother. She needed a deputy man in the family.

When I was still a boy, my father treated me like a young man, as if I knew everything and was able to do everything. He made himself subordinate to me, he taught me that I would decide on something and that he would follow. My mother did the same in a different way. She soon distanced herself from me as a child and saw me as the man of the house.

I cannot remember my mother ever embracing me during my childhood. She always kept her distance, out of respect, as if I was a man of rank.

I do not want to say that she did it deliberately or consciously. It just happened, it was probably nature that determined it. Maybe this happens in all families where one or both parents have a disability. In such a family, one of the children, usually the eldest, is given this kind of duty.

We lived in a big house with my parents' five and my uncle's seven children. This had been arranged by my father's parents with my eldest uncle, so that he would always be able to look after my father. We, the children, did not see each other as cousins, but as brothers and sisters. And thus I considered my uncle my spiritual father and example.

During all those years at home I wrote for myself and kept a diary in which I wrote about everything. During my student days I came into contact with an illegal guerrilla movement and joined the editorial staff of their underground paper.

During the revolution, the Iranian Kurds capitalised on the chaos by demanding independence. War broke out between the Kurds and the new regime. During that time, I travelled as a reporter for the underground paper to war zones in Kurdistan. When I returned to Teheran after a few months I had written a book, as well some articles, titled *What Do the Kurds Say?* or *What Do the Kurds Want?*

This book was my debut, but no publisher dared to publish it. I published it undercover under a pseudonym, using the pen name I still use. The first edition of my book sold out immediately, more than anything because nothing was said or written in the official media about the Kurds during that time.

I have described this part of my life in one of my earlier books, but now I wish to give an account of something that I have not mentioned until now.

After I moved to Teheran for my studies, my room in my parental house had stayed the same. In Teheran I lived at a secret address, I would sneak home under the cover of darkness once in a while, stay for a day and disappear again the following night.

But I had done a stupid thing. I had hidden the manuscript of my banned book about the Kurds in my room in my parents' house, because I thought it would be a shame to destroy it; especially because, in Kurdistan, I had written everything by hand, including a large number of notes. My sixteen year old sister had found the manuscript in my room, read it and given it to my cousin Djawad. Djawad, my uncle's twenty-one year old son, considered me his elder brother and above all an model. I never saw him as anything other than a brother.

Meanwhile something had happened of which I was not aware.

After reading my book, Djawad had made a secret journey through Kurdistan. He had followed the same route as the one I had written about in my book and he had taken many photos, including some showing armed Kurds and men on tanks.

I was always on my guard when, at night, I went to our city to visit my parents. I reckoned with the possibility that the secret service would burst into our house in the middle of night to arrest me. I double-locked the door and put a ladder against the wall so that I would be able to escape over the roofs if necessary.

During one of the nights that I was with my parents and I was lying in bed reading, I heard footsteps in the alleyway behind our door. I immediately put on my coat and waited. The doorbell went. My mother who was always anxious immediately came into my room and asked my father in sign language what she should do. I signed to her that she should not open the door, but that she should ask who was there.

She went to the door and called: 'Who's there?'

'Police! Open up!' a man shouted.

I grabbed my bag, shot into the inner court and climbed via the ladder onto the roof, fled over the neighbours' roofs, jumped down into a side street and began to sprint in the dark while two officers tried in vain to pursue me at some distance.

So I managed to escape, but the officers had entered our house for a search.

Then something happened which would mark my life for ever and determine its course.

Looking for any hidden documents, the officers turned my room upside down and threw my books onto the floor. They entered my sister's room, searched through her things, and turned her bed on its side, concealed under which was something that should never have been there: the hand-written manuscript of my book about the Kurds.

My cousin Djawad, who had been warned by my mother, tried to escape, but he was stopped in the alleyway by two officers. They took him inside to search his room. Yet again something happened that should not have happened. They found all the photos he had taken during his trip to Kurdistan; all the photos with the armed Kurds and tanks.

The officers were about to take my sister and Djawad away in handcuffs, when there was an explosion in the house.

My mother knew that my sister and Djawad would sometimes go out together at night to spray slogans against the regime on walls. She had warned my sister a few times that she should not do this, but she was not able to stop her. While the officers were focused on doing their search, my mother had sneaked the spray cans into the bathroom to destroy them. She was desperately trying to smash them with a hammer, when one of the cans exploded. The officers pulled their guns and ran to the place where the sound was coming from. They found my mother practically unconscious on the bathroom floor. Her head, body and hands were covered in red paint.

The officers also took my mother in for questioning.

This all happened during the violent war between Iran and Iraq, when Saddam Hussein had occupied the southern part of Iran and the new Iranian regime was being threatened. That's why the regime used more violence, and every dissenting voice was nipped in the bud. During that time they executed a few thousand people, all inexperienced, ambitious young people who refused to kowtow to the clerics.

I have written about these events in other books, which is why I want to leave it at this now. But I will give a brief resumé.

Djawad was executed a week after he was arrested. Because he had been opposed to the regime, he was not allowed to be buried in a cemetery; he was eventually buried in the back garden of a family who lived the mountains, in an invisible spot underneath the almond trees.

Sometime later my parents were summoned. A prison official told my mother that my sister would be executed that night and a family member would be allowed to come and collect her

body the following day. My uncle was the only person who would be able take on this task upon himself.

I could not leave my family alone at that point, I had to be with them. Through my doing, my sister had ended up in prison and it would be insufferable if I stayed in Teheran for my own safety. I did not want her to be buried in a deserted spot in the mountains. I was the man of the house and had to take decisions. I decided that she had to be buried at home, in the garden.

The next day, while my uncle was on his way to prison to collect my sister's body, I dug a grave for her in our garden, underneath the cherry tree.

But my uncle returned with an empty van.

My sister's sentence had been reduced.

My cousin Djawad is my sorrow. I write, I write day and night to atone for it, but I realise it will never come right.

My sister is my ache, she is now the mother of two grown-up children, but in my memory she has remained a sixteen-year old girl, she has never changed.

I wanted to see her again after all those years. That's why I arranged for her to join my mother on the trip to Dubai.

Chapter 20

The Fourth Dimension

In the hotel I sat down at the desk to make a few notes.

My sister brought my mother to her room and helped her freshen up. A moment later my mother joined me. She asked where my wife was and I told her for the umpteenth time that she was with her cousin's family.

'Oh, now I know which family you mean,' she said, 'the last time I came to see you with your father they invited us over for a meal. Sweet people.'

I wanted to say: 'Mother, we're in Dubai, not in Amsterdam.' But I didn't do it, I stopped writing and let her carry on talking.

I had never experienced old age up so close. My mother lived in a three-dimensional space. She was in Dubai, Amsterdam and en route to Mecca all at the same time. But now she

unexpectedly went one step further and entered a four-dimensional arena. She was telling me something about my father and to my surprise began to talk in sign language.

At first I was confused because I thought she was talking to me. But then I understood. I had grown old, so old that she took me for my father. I was not the person who was sitting opposite her at that point, my father was, and she was telling him about me. She signed: *Our son has arranged it. I'm on my way. I had to deal with the desert just now. I'm nearly there.*

I recovered and signed as if I was my father: *You shouldn't put our son under pressure to take you that holy place.*

No, of course I'm not doing that, she signed. *He arranged it himself. We were in a caravanserai just now.*

I heard the lift come up. There was some knocking. My sister went to open the door. My wife breezed in and called: 'How was it? Did you have a wonderful time together?'

'Totally wonderful, very special,' my sister replied.

My wife made her way over, kissed my mother on the cheek and asked: 'Was it fun? Was it good?' And then, to me: 'Did you cry?'

'No, no, I didn't cry,' I said and wiped away my tears with my hand.

'My cousin and his wife have invited you all over for dinner. We're going to them tomorrow,' she said.