

Book Excerpts from
Road Between Two Hearts:
A Black American Bride Discovers Iran

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Chapter One

Shadows of Doubt:

The History Behind the Move

I never told Mahmoud about the dreams: those ghastly, shadowy figures that infiltrated my sleep for weeks before we took that first flight from Columbus, Ohio to what eventually would be our new life together in his homeland, Iran.

Why couldn't I bring myself to tell him, or anyone else, about the dreams? I barely wanted to admit to their existence myself. Besides, I didn't feel the need to consult with anyone: I had a good enough sense of what the billowing figures, veiled in somber tones and drifting back and forth over linoleum tiles, revealed about the state of my psyche regarding the move. In that silent world I would tiptoe across each tile whenever I dared, trying desperately to avoid a brush with the drifting phantoms and careful not to tread on any of the lines. I would usually wake up at that point, heart clenched in my chest, and terrified to return to the same eerie dream in black and white.

That was how I spent several nights in the weeks leading up to our departure. During my waking hours it was a different story. Rather than face my own nagging questions, I spent time working to reassure friends, family members, and anyone else who asked if my plan to move to Iran with my husband wasn't a misguided decision, a terrible mistake. After all, I'd tell myself and others, wasn't *I* the same person who had embraced language and culture as her chosen field of study? From the time I was three or four years old, I'd been fascinated by sounds and sights that contrasted with America's and spent untold hours speaking myriad made-up foreign tongues. Thanks to the

recordings of my earliest hero Harry Belafonte, I'd belt out tunes I'd heard from other lands. At other times I'd prance the floor as I imagined myself the world's most renowned flamenco dancer. This little brown skinned girl of the fifties, raised by African-American parents to be proud of who I was and to believe I could be anyone or anything I wanted, wanted to see the world. Hadn't I lived out my commitment to that dream—pursuing two university degrees in Spanish and another in teaching foreign language and culture? Hadn't I demonstrated my ability to study, teach, even live successfully in other countries—Italy, Spain, Mexico? Was there any reason Iran couldn't be next?

More than any friend, enemy, or family member, it was the flamenco dancer's voice in me who counted out those reasons most compellingly, the one whose words of warning grated and burned and haunted me in my dreams. *Yes, it retorted, you've wanted to see the world, but the world you've always longed for is dressed in colors and rapt in song. It's tinged with drama, and leaps and twirls freely in expression. As the child who once loved to run barefoot in the rain and taste the raindrops, you wish to run into new worlds, open your mouth and drink freely without fear. You love to feel beautiful and not have anyone tell you that you're not supposed to love that feeling.*

Fortunately or unfortunately, by day I was so busy addressing the angst of others that I managed to hold my own inner voice at bay, save on those eerie, dream-filled nights. I suppose it was just too threatening for me to admit that a PhD graduate, who'd already spent years studying language and teaching about crossing cultures, could attempt the exercise herself and utterly fail in the process.

Of course, there were those dear family members and friends who understood all the struggle and soul-searching I'd already put myself through—and decided not to make

things harder for me than they already were. I felt tenderly toward them for the valiant effort they made to quell their own inner voices of doom and gloom. Even so, there were varying degrees of success for the person in each case.

For Aunt Anise, my father's sister, Mahmoud had long ago passed the test as far as being a "suitable suitor" for her niece. From the first days of meeting him, she had noticed how genuinely and unselfishly he would do things for me--like slice me an apple or drape my shoulders on a chilly evening. And when he extended similar courtesies and signs of thoughtfulness to her as well, she was duly impressed. If only, perhaps she thought, he could simply remain my perpetual suitor, without the relationship evolving as relationships tend to do. If only he hadn't committed to taking his life and education—and anyone married to him—back to Iran. Being the eighties, it was probably the worst of times to be "starting fresh" as an American in Iran, with a debilitating, ongoing war between Iran and Iraq, the peak of the Ayatollah Khomeini's rule in the country following the 1979 Iranian revolution and American hostage crisis, and severely strained relations at best with the United States.

As if the drama weren't compelling enough, there was also a best-selling book circulating at the time: *Not Without My Daughter*, the autobiographical account of an American woman, Betty Mahmoody, taken hostage with her daughter to Iran by her Iranian husband. In the book, the author reported that Dr. Mahmoody, an established Iranian physician practicing in the States, had taken her and their child on a purported two-week vacation to Iran for a visit with family—only to announce later that he'd brought them there to stay. After many unpleasant experiences and hostile encounters in the country, Mrs. Mahmoody was finally successful in escaping with her daughter, just

barely, through Turkey. The book drew national attention, seeming to touch a raw nerve in the popular American consciousness. It was even made into a film starring Sally Field, a popular artist and kind of sweetheart of the era.

Not one week after Mahmoud and I had said goodbye to Aunt Anise after a wonderful visit, I received a brown package from her in the mail. It was a copy of Betty Mahmoody's book. Given the personal affection my aunt had so quickly developed for Mahmoud, she might have felt as baffled and conflicted by her own behavior in sending it as I was by receiving it. Could it be that she wondered whether once in Iran, Mahmoud would trade in his lovable, reasonable nature for a dangerous and maniacal one, just like what Mrs. Mahmoody reported had happened with her husband? As a woman of color who knew how it felt to be judged based on preconceptions, I battled back and forth in my mind as to whether or not to read it—and finally gave in. And as much as I questioned some of the details surrounding the story, I still wondered how much my reading *Not Without My Daughter* contributed to the ghastly dreams that had seeped into my psyche.

Both of my sisters warmed quickly to Mahmoud when they met him. His down-to-earth and winsome ways quickly made for comfortable and lively exchanges between them. They liked his energy, his good-natured laughter, his ease with stepping in to help with tasks—any tasks, hard or simple. They described him as the brother none of us had ever had. I was grateful when they both gave their blessing to our engagement. At the same time, after earnestly apologizing for what she was about to say, one of my sisters bared her soul and revealed the bruising battle that her psyche was undergoing.

“Leslie,” she said, “I definitely think you should marry Mahmoud, but I think *he* should go over there and *you* should stay over here!”

Although I knew her comments were based on fear of an unfamiliar country rather than on her doubt in Mahmoud, my response to her was less than patient as I asked her what the point of such a marriage would be. And yet in my heart of hearts I couldn’t blame her. After all, *I* was the one having the spooky dreams about my future life in Iran, not she. Could it be that my inner self agreed with my sister’s sentiments more than I cared to admit? Could it be, in fact, that I had been playing games with myself all along by postponing the hard questions from the very beginning?

* * *

It had been nearly four years earlier, in 1984, when at age twenty-nine I met Mahmoud. I had never planned on cultivating a romance, let alone commitment, with this man—the first (well, second) Iranian I had ever met. At the same time, I did not resist the opportunity for friendship either, which appeared to evolve on its own. Our first encounter was in a dormitory elevator two days after I had moved to Columbus, Ohio, to begin my doctoral studies in foreign language and culture education at The Ohio State University. He smiled at me, and as a matter of course I smiled back. I found him attractive, with bright dark eyes and a winning smile, and I noticed that I was just a little taller than he was. We both got off on the same floor, where we eventually discovered we were neighbors, a few doors away from each other. Our frequent chance encounters led to casual planned ones—first to a campus movie, then to the campus McDonald’s, then to a simple bachelor’s meal in his dormitory room. For that first meal he shared the full store of his fridge: plain yogurt, pita bread, processed American cheese, and green onions, and

we talked and talked. It all tasted so fresh and strangely delicious, both the foods we ate and the tales he told. A wonderful storyteller, he painted a side of Iran I'd not been exposed to before. Sweet and romantic tales of growing up with his family in the village or in Tehran. Tales that took place among mountains or pomegranate orchards. Tales of the partridges, foxes, and mountain goats he hunted on foot or horseback with his father and brothers. Tales of the livestock he inoculated as a young veterinary technician. Most notable about his stories, however, was the way he lit up whenever he mentioned parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers. He'd be returning to them, he told me, once he completed his doctoral degree in agronomy within the three years or so ahead.

To top off his stories he carved us an apple for dessert, and I remember watching his masculine, sinuous hands in quiet admiration as he sat on his haunches and peeled with a ritual of careful, artistic grace. There was something so earthy and wholesome about him, and it amazed me that with such a simple act as carving an apple he commanded such presence.

At the time, and for three full years after that, I preferred to think of us as “the best of friends,” which would make things so much simpler. It wouldn't require anything beyond the present, which felt safe and perfect and wouldn't have to rock anyone's belief system, vision, or imagined future—not mine, not Mahmoud's, not our families'. In the meantime, I told myself, I'd be grateful for that wonderful companion, that beautiful listener, that fascinating storyteller of tales from a world I didn't know, the humble sharer of fresh and nourishing foods, the magical, meticulous carver of fruits.

Telling myself everything from, “He's returning to another world, faith, culture,” to, “He's two inches shorter than I am,” I could not admit to myself that within a very

short space of time my heart had chosen Mahmoud. Had my mother still been alive (she died in 1977, the same year that Mahmoud arrived in the States), I believe she would have recognized it sooner than I, admonishing me to “wake up” and get on with what my heart was telling me. I’d never seen Mom as a sentimental woman but as a practical, sensible one—one of very few individuals who could effectively use logic to argue matters of the heart and be right about it. True, Mahmoud did not match the image I’d carried so long in my head of the man I would someday marry—not in nationality, not in skin color, not in faith. He was not the “ideal Black man” I’d been holding out for. Still, I could imagine Mom saying something like, “Use your head. He’s been constant, loyal, respectful of your person and morals; he’s intelligent, non-egotistical, and he doesn’t play games. How easily can you find someone from your own country like that? You claim you’ve always wanted to see the world. Well, now that you have your chance, what’s holding you back?” What’s more, I have little doubt that Mahmoud, whose thinking and ways of communicating had frequently reminded me of my mother’s, would have openly agreed with her.

Yes, he had asked me to marry him nine months after our friendship began, but he never pushed me to make the commitment. In that same sensible, logical style as my mother’s, I remember his responding to my hesitation and expressed doubts without drama or sentimentality: “Take your time to decide. Whenever I marry, I want it to be for keeps. I’m pretty sure I can be a great husband to you, but you’ll want to be sure yourself before deciding to make your life with me in Iran. If you decide you can’t, that’s okay. I’ll always be your friend.”

Strange as it may sound, it wasn't the ongoing war between Iran and Iraq that was holding me back, nor was it exactly the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. It wasn't fear of a brand new language; why, I would welcome the chance to learn another one (this time Persian, or *Farsi*, as the Iranians call it). It wasn't concern over facing a new diet. I'd already feasted on the exquisite and aromatic dishes of Iran; if anything, that was a draw. The long distance from home didn't trouble me either. After all, it came with the territory of seeing new worlds and I trusted that somehow we'd figure out a way to make those visits back to the States. No, among the questions that pressed my heart most were marriage and faith issues: Would I, a wife whose Christian faith mattered to her, be kindly received in the Islamic Republic? For that matter, would I be able to demonstrate appropriate respect for the faith and religious practices of the country's majority of Muslim residents, and do so from the heart?

I could see that question as a legitimate concern that I could, and would, take to my most trusted pastors and confidants and explore with them earnestly. What I couldn't bring to anyone's attention, my own included, was something that by comparison seemed so miniscule, so petty. But for me, this little issue was huge. Not that I didn't recognize that many, if not most, American women would also find the matter of hijab—the head and body covering required in public of all women in Iran—challenging at the very least. But realistically or unrealistically, I'd set a different standard for myself. I was the professor who had always urged my language and culture students to replace judgment or fear of the “different” or unknown with an open mind, and I felt I had no choice but to do the same. And even if I did, I'd still have the “flamenco dancer” in me to contend with, the same one I'd grown up and lived with all my life. I might never literally dance the

flamenco, performing for people on a physical stage, but I still felt her love for life's pulse and drama, her hair unfastened and bare arms outstretched toward the sky. How could I hope to make her understand, let alone change? What would happen to "me" if she did? And even if I did manage to ignore the fact that I looked and felt different with my head, arms, chest, and legs perpetually covered in public, she would no doubt find a way to remind me.

And so ironically, it wasn't the "big" issues, but my "small" and private one about hijab that loomed large, and because I had trouble owning it, I simply kept pushing it to the back of my mind.

Until four years later—after a great deal of thinking, waiting, soul-searching, and even a two-year separation while I taught Spanish in another state—I made the life-changing decision to marry my soulmate Mahmoud back in Columbus.

My secret, unresolved "little issue" would have to wait for another three or four years until we'd make the big move to Iran. What couldn't wait was the one major step that remained before setting a wedding date: approaching my father in Connecticut so I could finally introduce him to Mahmoud and ask his blessing for our marriage. Guessing I knew how he'd respond to the future I was considering, I had put off telling him the story of our relationship for as long as I thought I could. But the time for talking with Dad had finally come.

To Mahmoud's mind there was never any question we would do anything else. In his culture's tradition, family was always involved in such matters and it would be unthinkable for him not to ask my father for his daughter's hand in marriage. It didn't matter that he was thirty-six and I was thirty-three at the time. It didn't matter how

uncomfortable it might make him feel. For him it was the only honorable thing to do, and we owed my father that respect. Among other things, it was sensing this sincere attitude in Mahmoud that struck a chord in my father and played a big part in winning him over. But it would be a long time before either Mahmoud or I would see the light at the end of that tunnel.

After all, perhaps from my father's perspective it made more sense to resist such a potentially risky union for his daughter than to support it—a rationale that may have predisposed him *not* to want to like Mahmoud from the start. It certainly would help explain the drama of their first encounter, the day when Mahmoud and I arrived at his Connecticut doorstep after the long drive from Columbus.

Aunt Anise had driven in from New York City at Dad's invitation and was also there to receive us. Despite her earlier "gift" in the mail, I still believed she genuinely liked Mahmoud, and I took comfort in knowing that she and my father had always been close. After Dad shook hands with Mahmoud, exchanged a few polite and perfunctory comments with him, and retreated to the back room with his sister, we could only hope she might put in a few good words on Mahmoud's behalf and that the evening would progress more warmly than it had started.

It didn't. Perhaps if I hadn't wanted quite so badly to make things work, my nerves would have been under better control and things would have gone more smoothly. The Iranian dinner that I had insisted on cooking all on my own would have turned out reasonably well, and the items in Dad's kitchen would have all remained in one piece. Instead, within the first hour of our arrival, the meat started smoking from the oven and

both the rice and split peas went mushy on the stove. And the glass of ice water that Dad had asked me to fetch him ended up a thousand splinters, all over the floor.

Dad, not thrilled to begin with, was not pleased by what he saw when he rushed to the scene. He overreacted, venting with angry comments about the spill, but Mahmoud would not let my father reprimand his own daughter in his own home. “Dr. Powell,” he said politely but firmly, “I will clean it up.” Dad, decidedly the king of his castle and not accustomed to being stood up to by anyone (let alone his daughter’s newly introduced Iranian boyfriend), paused before he redirected his remarks to me, pointing out the shattered mess on the tiles. To my horror of what might come next, however, Mahmoud stood his ground. “Dr. Powell,” he repeated calmly from several inches below my father’s eye level, “I *said* I would clean it up.” There was a pregnant silence in the room as Mahmoud made good on his word—all while father, daughter, and aunt stood frozen and watching—watching him on hands and knees as he wiped up tiny daggers of glass and ice until Dad retreated in silence to the back room again.

It seemed to me that things couldn’t have been worse, and yet I’ve learned as a mother myself that parents often have a way of surprising their children at all stages of life. The unmistakably mushy and singed meal I’d prepared was received with graciousness and gratitude by both Dad and Aunt Anise. What’s more, the conversation was decent enough, and I noted to myself that the equilibrium must have mysteriously been established among us while I wasn’t looking.

After the meal, I offered a round of coffee or tea, and Dad suggested that I bring the beverages into his room so that he and Mahmoud could continue in conversation. Not

certain I had heard him right, I brought in the hot drinks and, assuming that my company would be a pleasant addition, asked if I could join them.

“No,” Dad said.

So, I joined Aunt Anise in her bedroom while my father and my friend sat alone in the back room and spoke together for one, two, three...*four* hours into the night. It would be morning before I'd see either of them again.

What *had* they found to talk about for so many hours, I asked Mahmoud in a private moment the following day. My next surprise was to learn that whatever they talked about, it had absolutely nothing to do with me. They did manage to touch on quite a range of other topics: from politics, to physics, to economic theory, to philosophy. My father, a brilliant cardiologist and a true intellectual if I ever knew one, had always taken delight in exploring such subjects, both on his own and with others. On this decidedly unique occasion, however, I couldn't help but wonder whether the intent behind the discussion was not so much for intellectual stimulation as for putting his somewhat controversial guest to the test—and in his place—with a little battle of the wits. It appeared, however, that whatever knowledge my father had dished out to Mahmoud, Mahmoud was able to digest, savor with appreciation, and dish back in return. Evidently, by the end of the night both men had thoroughly enjoyed their marathon discussion, and what's more, what each had learned from the other.

Although I was duly proud of my father's intellectual prowess, I was used to it, but I was completely blown away by Mahmoud's ability to keep up with him. All he said, in humble explanation, was that in Iran he'd been taught the value of learning and exposing oneself to a wide range of topics—then added “I like Dr. Powell very much.”

As for my father's opinion, Aunt Anise later told me that he'd confessed to being "pleasantly surprised" by the knowledge and substance of a man almost thirty years his junior. I cannot say what made the most inroads in their relationship: the four-hour discussion in the back room that night, the respectful way Mahmoud had managed to stand up to Dad from down on the kitchen floor, or the special trip Mahmoud made back to Connecticut to ask Dad for his daughter's hand (even after Dad had privately told me he couldn't condone a marriage involving my move to Iran). What I can say is that my father's delayed but ultimately favorable response to Mahmoud's gutsy stance in the kitchen on his daughter's behalf surprised me. Perhaps I was even more surprised, and touched, to learn from my aunt that after all had been said and done, he'd been affected by the "quiet resolve" he'd seen in my eyes for my future husband. In any case, I can say that the day finally came when he proudly called Mahmoud "my son" and consented to give me away at our wedding.

Following both American and Persian traditions and reciting our vows in a lush Ohio garden before God with a Presbyterian minister, an imam, the members of my family, and a whole host of local and international friends present, on June 25, 1988, we reverently announced our sincere intention to live out a marriage that *would* be "for keeps." Sadly, none of Mahmoud's immediate family could be present, though from thousands of miles away they were with us, extending their good faith support.

In the two years that followed, the experience symbolized by the honey cakes we fed each other at the wedding was realized daily in my life with Mahmoud. We settled into our cozy Columbus home, found work at Ohio State, and enjoyed our friends and visits with my family. At the same time, we began to set our sights and establish our path,

piece by piece, for Iran. After our one-year wedding anniversary, Mahmoud made the trip back alone. It was deep and emotional—his first reunion with family, and a post-revolutionary Iran, in twelve long years. A year after that, he made his first connection with the universities there to explore work prospects. The time was fast approaching when I'd be slated to join him for my own first visit before the move. I was also due to discover that my secret "big little issue," the one I'd managed to shelve for so many years but not to resolve, would no longer be content to collect dust in a corner and be ignored. Two months before we were scheduled to make the flight, the haunting dreams that would flag my attention began.

Chapter Eleven

How Mr. Farmer Ended Up Keeping the Farm
(and Other Quirky Stories About University Life)

“I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.”

—Abraham Lincoln

My debut as Assistant Professor of English at Isfahan University of Technology began in January of 1993, about six weeks after we first moved into the kuee.

I realized that I faced the unknown, but I still faced it with anticipation and excitement.

I was grateful for the two brief years of experience I had gained from teaching English to a broad mix of international students at an Ohio college (Ohio Dominican) just before moving here. What made the job most fun was also what had sometimes made it the most challenging: the humbling discovery that what we as teachers so carefully plan and present to our students is not necessarily what they walk away from our classrooms learning or remembering. Rather, in the cross-cultural classroom it’s probably better to be prepared for the unexpected. In all fairness, as I look back on my years of teaching in Iran, I suspect that my students there might also have benefited from the same advice before being introduced to their American teacher, *Khanum Pahvel* (Powell).

I had precious little to go on where it came to teaching at an Iranian university. Before the move, there had been one small admonition about teaching I’d received from an Iranian colleague whom Mahmoud and I had met as a visiting professor in the States.

His advice was clear, unmovable, and surprising coming from a person who had his own hilarious sense of humor. But he was clearly not joking when he told me solemnly and more than once, as if I in particular needed to hear it, “Remember, whatever you do, *you must never laugh, or even smile, in the classroom.*” It felt like a warning for the former Spanish instructor who was known for her jovial and carefree style of presenting and interacting with students. Although the admonition was unsettling and I questioned whether I could really follow it, I kept the message tucked in a corner of my mind.

Up till that first day when I finally made it to the classroom, I tried to be diligent about monitoring my expectations, to be careful not to envision my future classes as near blueprints of the ones I’d left behind in the States. Resolved to “do as the Persians do” without prejudice or cynicism, I watched and listened for cues that would prepare me for my future role as a professor of English at a distinguished university.

So when I dropped Parisa off at daycare one morning and noticed the children separate out to their teachers’ cheerful singsong orders: “*Dokhtar-ah bah dokhtar-ah, pesar-ah bah pesar-ah!*” (“*Girls with girls [and] boys with boys!*”), I made that mental leap to the university classroom and drew some parallels. I asked myself how it would feel to teach a classroom full of *dokhtar-ah* (young women) only: “limiting” and “repressive,” or “liberating” and “empowering”? As I let myself think about it, I could see the benefits of teaching an all-female group, like having to worry less about whether or not my hairline was visible under my hood), like maybe being able to get away with a laugh or smile in the classroom every once in a while, in spite of our colleague’s warning. In the end, it made sense to me that with a class full of female students I’d be much freer,

both literally and figuratively, to “let my hair down” somewhat, to feel more comfortable in my skin.

All fine and good, but the day finally came for me to test that all out. Fitted in my simple forest green manteau with green hood to match and armed with my well-worn *English for Engineering Students* reader in hand, I strode into the classroom with feigned confidence and ease. That is, until I heard the staccato *whoosh* of an entire roomful of people rising to their feet. Quickly collecting myself, I stopped, turned, and assumed my space at the front of the classroom.

Standing before me, as if at attention, was a roomful of *men*, with a sea of men’s faces, some serious, some smiling, but all looking at me.

Could I possibly be in the wrong classroom? “English for Engineering Students?” I asked in English, and they all nodded. As if the “male factor” weren’t disconcerting enough, the “stand-up-for-the-teacher” factor left me dumbfounded. The last time I’d experienced that kind of scenario had been thirty years ago, back in the sixties. In that era I happened to be one of those students. And my teacher, a nun in her black and white habit, mirrored how I now looked in my coat and hood.

Stunned as I was by those first ten seconds in the classroom, there was still nothing to do but write my name on the blackboard: “Dr. Leslie Powell.” I hadn’t used that name since before I was married, but as my family name at birth, it still presided in Iranian tradition. When I turned back around to face the students, most had settled back into their seats. It was then that I could make out a sea of *women’s* faces too, dotting the back end of the room. These women, same as I, were shrouded in hoods or veils.

Be prepared for the unexpected...!

In my intention to prepare, all I'd done, evidently, was to build a new expectation based on the faulty assumption that I'd be assigned to a classroom of women only.

I didn't really mind being wrong about male and female university students being taught in separate classrooms, as was true for students from preschool through high school. On the contrary, I somehow found comfort, a sense of normalcy, in the familiarity of a coed setting. Never mind that the women were sitting together at the back of the room; that was something that I as the classroom instructor could remedy easily enough. So, after calling the roll, carefully pronouncing the full name of each student to make sure I was saying it right, I decided to set things in motion. First, I shuffled the seating arrangement, then I sorted the mix of students, male and female alike, into small groups for an initial "icebreaking activity" in English.

The questions I'd assigned were deliberately "fun." The tone I'd set was definitely "light." The instructions I'd given were straightforward and clear. For some reason, though, what followed alternated between a conspicuous silence and almost indecipherable mumbling for the duration of the activity. I would compare the energy of those interactions to the kind I used to have with my son Nikiar as a teenager: ("So, how was your day today?" "Fine." "Well, what did you do?" "I don't know; I was at school." "I *know* you were at school, but what happened there—anything interesting?" "Not a whole lot; it was pretty much okay...")

So much for the icebreaker. However much I circulated among the clusters and encouraged them to "*Talk* to each other," the "ice" in the classroom appeared to be in no danger of breaking, thawing, or otherwise leaving the room.

Twenty minutes later, I admitted defeat to myself and decided not to prolong the awkwardness of the exercise. I announced the homework for the next session and dismissed class early. Just as in the States, the classroom all but cleared within the span of ten seconds.

It was then that I met my first University Friend. One young man, no more than nineteen or twenty years old, had chosen to remain behind. Tall, with kind, bright eyes and a polished appearance, he approached me with a respectful but confident demeanor. When he introduced himself as “Behrang” and continued his rhetoric in English, I knew this was a gentleman with no ordinary command of the language. It was a pleasure to hear his mastery of English grammar, vocabulary, and diction, possibly acquired in one of the finer public academies specializing in language instruction. In fact, as he spoke I had to wonder if he wasn’t completely overqualified for the course.

Gently, demurely, but with an unmistakable air of confidence, he asked if he could make a suggestion. When I gave him the go-ahead, he suggested that in the future, I might want to address the female students by their last names only, at least during class time. When I asked him why, he explained politely (while suppressing his mirth) that most young women consider their first names to be too personal in nature to be shared within earshot of the male students.

“I see,” I said with composed horror, recalling how carefully and ceremoniously I’d given attention to each and every name on the roster. I collected myself before posing the next question. “And the small groups I put together, with men and women in the same group. Was that okay, or was that also a mistake?”

I don't remember how he confirmed the dire miscalculation of *that* decision. However he did it, I'm sure it was polite and gentle, and I'm also sure he had great fun doing it. At any rate, I had already figured out the (singsong) answer to my question: "*Dokhtar-ah bah dokhtar-ah, pesar-ah bah pesar-ah!* (Girls with girls [and] boys with boys!)" Even in the coed classroom of the university this rule was still operative, and everyone knew it. Everyone except the new American professor on the block.

I could feel the color draining from my face as I thanked the young man and we said goodbye. His eyes were twinkling mischievously, though not maliciously, when he left.

Concerned that my blunders would reach the ears of my direct superiors before I'd have a chance to explain, I headed straight for the central office of the *Markazeh Zaban* (The Language Center) to present my case to the director, Dr. Dalili. I perceived him to be a serious man, subscribing to the "no-smile" rule of thumb. Even so, my earlier encounters with him had led me to like him and trust his fairness. He had always made time for me, and this time was no exception.

He listened silently and attentively as I recreated the classroom scenario for him, with me as the fumbling central character. While appropriately authoritative in his demeanor, his eyes, like those of the young man Behrang, somehow revealed a tinge of merriment.

"I see," was his initial two-word response to my humble and apologetic confession, and then, with the slightest edge of curiosity in his voice, "Anything else?"

To prove I had learned my lesson, I told him that I now understood that the male and female students definitely did *not* like being put together in the same group.

His reply, delivered dryly in the form of a question, surprised me. “Oh? And how can you be sure of *that*?”

I studied his nearly poker face and saw that the masked merriment was still there. But he paused and held onto his serious stance before speaking.

“But yes, even if they did like it, they’re not really supposed to. So you might want to try a different approach next time,” was all he said calmly, leaving my dignity intact.

In the weeks to follow, I was to witness and ponder new things both in and out of the classroom. They continually defied my understanding of the kinds of rules and dynamics that could or could not function in coexistence. Men and women kept themselves apart, or at least compartmentalized, at the university. At the same time, classes were coed and I was assigned to teach both male and female students. Women sat in the back of the classroom, but as I figured out much later, it was often by preference and not some external mandate that relegated them to second place. Evidently, just as many of the female students preferred not to have their first names surveyed by their male counterparts, they also preferred to sit behind the men so as not to allow anything else of their person to be surveyed either.

Other rules I’d picked up stayed planted in my head. I wasn’t supposed to smile in the classroom, *ever*. Presumably this was because as a professor I was to maintain clear boundaries where my authority was concerned and because the university was, after all, a serious setting dedicated to a serious purpose. Why, then, was it so easy to detect that love for hilarity and friendship, bubbling beneath the surface of even the most formal and polished of my students and colleagues? Why did I so frequently find myself in the

middle of a serious conversation that could take an unexpected detour into the whimsical, mischievous, or outrageous?

There were several of these incidents, including those where I discovered that in the minds of many students, grades were open for negotiation. This forward kind of behavior—bargaining for grades—didn't make sense to me. It didn't fit with a world where students stood up for their teachers, were lavish with honorifics like *Khanumeh Doktor*, and frequently used subtle gestures of deference—the slightest bow of the head, frequent downward glances, a hand laid upon the heart—to cultivate a sense of intimacy while maintaining a social distance between themselves and their professors.

Somebody needed to explain that incongruence to Mohsen, another student in my English for Engineering Students class. He was quite a good-looking and amiable young man, with laughing amber eyes and a sociable nature. I remember enjoying several pleasant exchanges with him both during and after class, when he seemed genuinely curious about life in the United States and, on the flip side, my impressions of Iran and the Iranian people. With his carefree, even playful personality, he didn't quite fit the profile of the “average” university student with that aura of reserve and formality on the face of things. Still, he always maintained those small and courteous phrases and gestures meant to demonstrate his regard.

In spite of his lively and charming presence, Mohsen had missed several assignments and not performed particularly well on tests. One day close to the end of the term, he paid me a visit in my office to ask me how he had fared on the last one. I was delighted to tell him how relieved I was. It looked like he was going to pass the class after all; he had managed to stay afloat in the course with a solid average of “10” (that is,

based on a 20-point scale). One point less would have made the difference between passing and failing, but fortunately he'd managed to hold on to all the ten points he needed to pass. Sincerely happy for him, I congratulated him.

It was at that point in the conversation that we started drifting into that Unexpected Detour.

"*Ghorbaneh shoma* (I'm deeply indebted)," he began as a matter of course, then moved on to the point. "But I will need more points than that."

"I don't understand," I said blankly. "What do you mean?"

The young man also looked back at me blankly, not yet aware I didn't know what it meant to sit with a student at the bargaining table. "Well," he proceeded cautiously, "if you could increase my grade by a few points, my parents will be happy."

Although it was my first experience with this kind of conversation, I could see where it was heading. I now faced the choice of either ending it right there or letting it go further to satisfy my fascination and curiosity.

"How many more points do you need?" I heard myself ask.

"An '18' would be good," he said, not missing a beat.

"An '18'!" My words echoed soundly, both as a question and a declaration of disbelief. "How can you possibly ask me to raise your grade from a **10** (at 50%) to an **18** (at 90%)—I mean, just like that?"

"Look," he proposed in a matter of fact, good-natured, and slightly devious tone (as if his idea made all the sense in the world, and at the same time, not really). "You add eight points to my grade this term, see? And then next term, I'll be sure to sign up for one of your classes and you can subtract those eight points from whatever grade I get then."

Despite my shock, the proposal sounded so absurd, and yet he had done it all in such a charming way, all I could do was laugh out loud in spite of myself. “Right!” I said, because I didn’t know at that point how to say in Persian, “But look, Pal, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

We bantered and sparred back and forth in the most amicable of ways until he finally conceded with grace and humor. Despite our differences, his bright and talkative visits would continue, and we would continue to enjoy a sweet relationship between professor and student. In a way I felt indebted to him. If there was anyone to help prepare me for new experiences and issues to navigate at the university, Mohsen was among the best ones to do so—along with my First University Friend Behrang.

* * *

But I don’t think anything could have prepared me for the arrival of a certain “Mr. Farmer,” as I called him, to one of my classes. Or for how his memory stalked me and settled into my university consciousness to stay. I’m surprised I never had nightmares about the guy. How ironic that this mild-mannered gentleman in my English for Agricultural Students class managed to shake my world and, without realizing it, to introduce a lively dose of discord into nearly five years of marital solidarity between me and my husband. Just as ironic, I’m not sure I would be able to recognize his real name or refer to him by anything other than that cryptic title of “Mr. Farmer.” I’m not even sure I would know him now if I saw him. The only thing I recall of his physical appearance is that he was of short stature and slight build, and that generally he wore plain clothes and had dark hair and a beard. I don’t remember anything about his eyes because, constantly

glancing downward, he never looked directly at me, even on the rare occasions we spoke to each other.

The first time was when I called on him in class one day to respond to a homework item from the textbook, and in three short words of English he told me he didn't know. The second time was when he appeared on the very last day of class. The final exam had just been administered and collected, and yet there he was, weeks after not having attended or turned in a single assignment. Still avoiding my gaze, and in the softest of voices and most beautiful Persian, he politely explained that he'd come to arrange to make up the final exam he'd just missed, if I would be so kind to allow it.

I was dumbfounded by the audacity of his request, especially from a fellow who struck me as painfully shy—and had all but blown off English class till he finally remembered he'd need a passing grade in order to graduate.

In response, I made it known that *no*, I wasn't feeling particularly kindly. And with that, I more or less sent him packing.

Wondering whether this gentleman had been trying to play me as the naïve foreigner, and torturing myself with the question, "Had I smiled too much in class?" I hurried home, flustered and indignant. I was anxious to reconstruct the story for Mahmoud, to receive some empathy and affirmation for how I had responded. Ready or not, my husband received an earful when I got home. In exchange, he did have some empathy to offer, but not necessarily for the person I had in mind.

When I got to the part about how the guy wouldn't so much as look me in the eye even once, Mahmoud explained that by lowering his gaze, he was actually *demonstrating respect* to me—not only as a person of authority, but as a member of the opposite sex.

His comment offered a perspective I hadn't considered, deserving further exploration at least, but well, I didn't have the patience to pursue it at this point. "Never mind all that," I said. "Do you know that he actually asked me if I would let him make up the final exam?"

"And?" my husband asked.

"And what?" I shot back.

"And will you?" my husband returned, a tinge of hopefulness in his voice.

It was one of those moments when I knew intellectually that I was talking with my husband, but with great irritation I also wondered what had happened to the "American" side of him. Then again, I thought back on times in the States when I had grumbled to him about the antics of some of the ESL students I'd had there. Times in which they, from my perspective, had clearly crossed the line in their attitudes or expectations. Come to think of it, Mahmoud, once a newly arrived ESL student himself, had more often than not seemed inclined to take *their* side.

"Of course not," I said tersely.

"Okay Babe," he answered humbly, wisely ending the subject.

Until one fine afternoon of the following week we came upon the subject again. Only this time Mahmoud brought it up.

Mr. Farmer, the meek and mild, had pulled out his first round of arsenal by approaching my husband. Evidently Mahmoud had also been his professor in agronomy two terms back. What did he want of my husband, the *Aqayeh Doktor Ahmadi*? A mere favor: to approach me on his behalf with the same tired request for a makeup test.

That is to say, as I saw it, to pull rank on his wife.

Why was I so livid over this incident as I had been about no other? It wasn't the first time I'd wrestled with women's issues in Iran. After living a year and a half in this new cultural setting, I'd already visited and revisited my thoughts on the issue of female dress. I'd actually made peace with that ghostly garment, the black chador I'd secretly had nightmares about before moving here. Not that I was thrilled with what appeared to be one standard of modesty expected of women and another of men, or that people were expected to conform to that mandated standard or face possible repercussions. It's not that I hadn't occasionally shed tears over having to wear an overcoat outside on those hot, hot summer days. It's not that I hadn't had to swallow back the humiliation I felt in having to rearrange or tighten up my scarf when silently signaled to do so by an official, passerby, or even student. Still, I'd come to sense how for some women, the outer garment was a way to preserve their comfort or dignity or to shield themselves from the unwelcome attention of onlookers. From that perspective, I figured it was no less dignified or valid a choice than other women's decision to accentuate their feminine form or beauty without undue concern for how others might react.

But back to the story of Mr. Farmer and the question it raises: Why was I so incensed over the role apparently expected of me as a woman in this scenario? What was the contributing factor here that made all the difference?

Up till then, any issue I'd had to confront as a woman in Iran had occurred outside of my marriage, and for all practical purposes outside of my husband's control. This time my husband had been actively solicited to play a role, and by all indications Mahmoud seemed willing to comply. But Mr. Farmer's strategy had backfired, and both men had

dug their own graves on this one. On my end, the only digging I was going to do was to dig my heels in deeper, meaning *no way, no how, no make-up test*.

Stuck between wanting both to validate my feelings and to justify his role as his student's advocate, Mahmoud first tried (unsuccessfully) to appeal to my sense of humor and then (unsuccessfully) to appeal to my compassion. Carefully, he built a case that in the face of Iran's struggling economy, exploding population, fierce academic competition, and alarming shortage of professional positions, the odds were stacked impossibly high against its university students—with the stakes even higher for any student facing the disgrace of failing out of school.

Mahmoud's explanation just didn't do it for me. "Then why wouldn't he be all the more careful about attending class, completing assignments, and attending the final exam on time, just like everyone else?" I demanded to know. My emphatic tones at the end, I hoped, would signal my American-born version of justice: that no student should get special treatment, that *all students should be judged by the same rules*.

It would have been a fine time for Mahmoud to take my hands in his, exclaim "Whatever was I thinking?" and thank me for how brilliantly I'd pointed out his oversight of basic ethics. Instead, he muttered another "Okay, Babe," and something about the student now having to "take care of affairs at the farm." Although I was unsure of the details behind the statement, I picked up that my Iranian spouse was disappointed in my apparent failure to recognize that in the ups and downs of life, *everyone needs a little extra understanding every now and then*.

With neither of us moved by the other's argument and each clearly irritated with the other, we both realized that we had reached a stalemate in this conversation.

Fortunately, there was enough human capital invested in every other aspect of our relationship that we could avoid the land mine of this one, agree to disagree, and move on. As far as I understood, that meant that I, as Mr. Farmer's professor, would have the final say, that my preference would be honored, and that Mr. Farmer would have to deal with failing English for Agricultural Students.

Even so, realizing that my decision had not settled well with Mahmoud and that a few days still remained before final grades had to be turned in, I felt a needling pressure within me to explore the question further on my own.

I took the dilemma to my colleagues at the Language Center. I also managed to insert it as a casual topic of conversation during social visits with fellow professors back at the kuee. Sorry to say, my inquiries did not help me find a clear and consistent pattern for responding to students requesting second chances. There were colleagues I liked and respected whose facial expressions, if not their words, gave away that under similar circumstances, they'd surely have given their students a make-up test. Other professors I respected just as much made it perfectly clear that if asked to do the same thing under similar circumstances, well, they'd rather not have to. The bottom line was that unlike me, no one chose the categorical *NO* as the acceptable response. At best, the closest response to mine was more like a categorical *it depends*. It looked like the resolution I'd been hoping for was nowhere in sight.

As for Mahmoud, he'd been busy with other things, like being the target of another's persistent inquiries, it seemed. Evidently Mr. Farmer, the resolute and relentless, had pulled out his second arsenal by appearing at my husband's office door one day, and the next day, and the day after that, with a new proposal. And this proposal,

he carefully explained more than once, *this proposal Khanum Pahvel* wouldn't even have to sign off on or bother herself over.

Mahmoud recounted the story as I, *Khanum Pahvel*, took it all in: In order to graduate from the university, "Mr. F." didn't necessarily require a passing grade in English. All he needed was a way to protect his overall grade point average (GPA) from the plummeting effects of a grade gone wrong. One way to do this would be to find, somewhere, somehow, an elevated grade to fold into his GPA to counteract the effects of the English grade that threatened to sink his ship, to cost him the farm, to devastate his world.

"Wait a minute!" I protested halfway in disbelief, halfway defensively. "Cost him the farm? What do you mean, 'cost him the farm'? *What farm?*" It was at this point that I think the name "Mr. Farmer" materialized in my mind and stuck there forever. I couldn't see what this man's being granted or denied the chance for a make-up test in English possibly had to do with his keeping a farm or losing it. And even if it did, I surely wasn't willing to take the blame for it.

Mahmoud didn't answer but instead went on with the saga of Mr. F. Anyway, he explained, in the end Mr. F would need the cooperation of a sympathetic professor who'd be willing to enter that elevated grade into his record. To Mr. Farmer's mind, that's where my husband could lend a hand.

"Wait a minute!" I sliced in again. "But how is it even possible for you to raise his grade when you're not his professor anymore? You haven't even had him in class for two whole terms, so then why is he coming to *you?*"

Mahmoud just looked at me straight in the eye, and I dropped the question. “So what did you tell him?” I asked instead.

His answer surprised me. “I told him that if he had any regard or compassion for me at all, if he didn’t want me to end up with a divorce on my hands, he would back off and ask his other professors for assistance on this.”

Evidently that was the only response that had made sense to Mr. Farmer. In pursuit of “Plan B” as Mahmoud requested, Mr. Farmer backed off, leaving both Mahmoud and me relieved.

Of course, as you have probably guessed, the relief was only temporary. Several days later, Mr. Farmer (the presumptuous and predatory) was back.

This time, however, he was not at my husband’s office door, but *at the doorstep of our home* at the kuee. Apparently, Mr. F had already made the rounds to all his other professors from the current term to ask for a grade hike and had come back empty-handed. “Plan B” had not panned out, and he was back to “Plan A” (that is, “A” as in “Ahmadi”).

How did “Ahmadi,” my husband who answered the door, respond to Mr. Farmer’s arrival? While I was in the house at the time, I don’t know exactly what happened in those minutes. Totally unnerved that this student had crossed all conceivable boundaries and stood at the very threshold of our home, I’d hidden myself away in the kitchen, unable to make out what was being said. All I could hear was the deep and distant voices of the two men going back and forth in Persian at an even keel. At this point all I wanted was for the Mr. Farmer drama to end. I can only imagine that

Mahmoud, among the most patient and kind of souls, had reached that point of saturation, frustration, and weariness long before.

So when the conversation had ended, Mr. Farmer had left, Mahmoud had entered the kitchen, and I dared to ask him “What happened?” all he said was, “I will take care of it.” And nothing more was said of it for a long, long time.

In due time we were able to talk about it and I learned what had happened. Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadi, Mr. Farmer’s professor from a previous class, went to the registrar to request the back records of that class and the form needed to resubmit the grade. After he had extracted an extra assignment on a suitable topic from Mr. F’s hand, the grade was resubmitted. This “slight” transaction managed to raise Mr. Farmer’s overall grade point average enough to make it possible for him to graduate, and evidently no one in the registrar’s office asked any questions. It was as if the whole university somehow knew of the drama of Dr. Ahmadi, his foreign wife *Khanum Pahvel*, and Mr. Farmer, and had mercifully looked the other way.

The day finally arrived when I genuinely felt happy to learn that Mr. Farmer had safely graduated after all, presumably with his farm intact. *Mr. Farmer, should you ever read these lines, I want you to know that. It’s not that I have any better grasp of your circumstances now than then. It’s that I now realize I never gave myself the chance to try. In any case, I’m glad you didn’t give up too easily on the farm, and I’m glad I didn’t give up too easily on my husband.*

As I look back on that bizarre episode, I realize I was just as guilty, or at least just as blind as the next guy when it came to jumping to conclusions. Ironically, some of my shakiest conclusions occurred right at the points where I felt the most certain of myself.

Where it came to deciding the fate of students like Mr. Farmer, I thought at the time I was looking for answers. Had I paused to have a deeper conversation with myself, though, I might have asked if what I was really seeking was someone's permission to give this student his just deserts. To my mind, he had not only failed to show up for class or the final exam; he had tried to usurp my authority as a teacher by involving somebody else (who just happened to be my husband!). At the same time, I was not aware that when conflicts arise in Iranian culture, it is common to involve a third-party advocate to present an appeal, not so much a demand. That in turn made me realize I couldn't *really* be sure of Mr. Farmer's intentions toward me. So whether he had approached my husband to force my hand or simply voice an honest request, I guess I'll never know. But I'm not asking Mahmoud at this juncture.

By the end of that episode with Mr. Farmer, I noticed changes in me that I wasn't prepared for, that became apparent when I came back to teach in America. As far as my ability to make the simplest decision on a student's work, on changing a grade, or on granting an extension, it seemed I was ruined for life. To my mind there was always another way of looking at things, and I guess I finally decided life was too short for me to try to figure those kinds of things out. Ironically, perhaps Mr. Farmer and I had more in common than I thought. Just as Mr. Farmer had decided to check out of English class, I ultimately decided to check out of university life—entirely. God forbid that I'd have to seek permission from the likes and iron fist of a "Khanum Powell type" should I want to enter university teaching again. But "knock on wood" (an expression the Iranians use as well), I doubt I ever will.