

A GIRL CALLED RUMI

by

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PART I

Once there was.

Once there wasn't.

Once there was war.

Once there wasn't time for stories.

Once there were terrible laws.

Once there wasn't a way out.

Once there was a girl . . .

KIMIA — SHIRAZ, IRAN, 1981

I wasn't supposed to be there. I'd been on my way to the bakery to buy naan for dinner. But then—the siren call. What nine-year-old can resist a story?

I squeezed the bread money in my sweaty hand and looked up as the cool breeze brought the first evening star above the mountains cradling Shiraz. The makeshift stage was directly in my path, right in the middle of Felekeh Ghasrodasht Square. On the stage, a middle-aged trio in worn suit jackets struck a bittersweet overture. The melody transitioned into a beguiling rendition of the centuries-old vatanam, a song that always reminded me of road-weary caravan travelers longing to go home. I closed my eyes and listened. I could sense the excitement of other children, barely holding still, eyes glued to the stage in anticipation. Their parents, busy with the usual banter about war and shortages of food and water, sat cross-legged on colorful blankets.

Like all Shirazis, they were most comfortable when picnicking outdoors, eating from steaming bowls of vegetable aash and drinking fragrant rosewater tea.

I shifted from one foot to the other. I needed to head to the bakery, not stand near the stage, heart thumping with the music. “I’ll just stay for a minute,” I tried to convince my feet.

The music swelled in a flurry to an ecstatic crescendo, and by the time it settled into a steady tempo, I had all but forgotten about the naan. Behind a white screen, center stage, a light began to glow, hushing the crowd. Children pointed and bounced; adults paused in their conversations.

Out from the shadows, stage left, limped an old man wearing a tattered Bakhtiari tunic and a cap and shawl. Using a wooden cane, he shuffled across the stage and sat down just as the light came to its full brightness behind the white screen.

My feet stopped dancing.

A giant shadow puppet of the Simorgh appeared on the screen. The bird beat its magnificent wings in time with the music, the long silky plume on her head wind-tossed like a girl’s hair. Unlike the Simorgh in my mother’s poetry book, this one had the face of an eagle and a fierce beak. Flapping its elaborate feathers, the bird glided across an imaginary sky.

The other children jumped and shrieked with delight, but I stood still. The twilight spring air grew charged around me, and I leaned forward, feeling the magnetic pull of the bird. Then, from everywhere, a commanding tenor’s voice filled the square with a single note: “Huuu . . .”

I searched for the source of the haunting sound and zeroed in on the old man. It was him, but he was barely pursing his lips or showing any sign of effort. Was I imagining it or was he also looking at me? Yes, his eyes pierced me with their intense gaze.

The old man brought his note to an end. He released me from his gaze and spoke, his voice calm and powerful. “Once there was. Once there wasn’t. Besides God, no one was.”

Even the smallest of the children in the audience became quiet.

He continued, “King Sahm was hoping for the perfect heir, but when his son was born, the child was as white as snow. King Sahm thought his wife had birthed a demon, so he ordered it to be taken to the foothills of the Alborz Mountains. The baby, Zaal, was alone and abandoned, cold and crying. But this calamity brought him the most wondrous gift. It changed his destiny and bonded him with the most majestic creature in heaven and on earth.”

The musicians had disappeared into the background, but a bright sound of chimes reached us from a faraway land. The puppeteers, silent and almost invisible behind the screen, controlled the shadow puppets with precision and grace. In harmony with the melody, the stage grew dim.

“Suddenly the sky darkened, and a mighty wind lifted the infant up into the air. The birds gathered to hold his swaddle blanket with their beaks and claws, so he wouldn’t fall. They flapped their wings and looked with awe to see a giant bird approaching. They had heard stories, but they hadn’t known she was real. The Simorgh’s wings spanned the whole mountain chain and some of the forest.”

The puppeteers brought the Simorgh back to the screen. When the bird soared up in a fast, sudden movement, uncontrollable laughter rippled inside me and escaped from my mouth.

“When the Simorgh flapped her great wings, she shook loose the seeds of all the plants and trees and sent them flying throughout the world,” the old man continued.

Sparkling confetti blew from the stage and landed on our heads. Children held out their

hands to catch the drops of magical rain.

“The Simorgh heard the infant’s cries and swooped down. Upon seeing him, she fell in love. The birds understood what they needed to do right away. They placed the bundle on the Simorgh’s back and she headed up to the highest peak in Persia. The very top of Mount Damavand, to her nest . . .”

The bird lifted the bundle across the stage-sky to the edge of the screen. As the music picked up, she emerged from beyond the screen with iridescent wings and an emerald-green eye, sparkling brightly. The music grew even louder, masking the collective gasp of the audience. I marveled at the tiny embroideries on her wings. As the Simorgh took flight over the buildings surrounding the square, I squinted, watching her until her figure was a small bright dot, disappearing into the starry night.

Then I returned my focus to the stage. The old man was looking right at me. He winked.

Did his wink produce the deafening thump that shook the earth?

A fiery sun rose behind the stage, sending sparks over the rooftop. It took a moment for me to grasp that this wasn’t part of the show. All around me people rushed about, their faces contorted in screams.

But a strange silence had enveloped me. I was motionless in the midst of the chaos, staring at the storyteller. He stood, smiling back at me. The backdrop that showed the Alborz Mountains collapsed in slow motion behind him as people hurried away. Children cried silently as parents swooped in to grab them.

I spotted my big brother, Arman, zigzagging through people, making his way to where I stood entranced.

I couldn't hear his screams, but Arman's breath, hot and urgent, grazed my face as he grabbed my shoulders and pulled me away from the stage. A nearby building burst into flames. I wanted to protest, but instead my lips stretched into a big smile. I felt Arman shaking me by the shoulders as he shouted words I could not hear.

Why does he keep shaking me? Wait, am I deaf?

No sooner had I completed the thought than a flood of sounds—explosions, screaming, ambulance sirens—came with a fury. The smoke burned my eyes, and I coughed, choking on its scorched bitterness.

"What's the matter with you?" Arman yelled, yanking my arm. "Let's go!"

"But the morshed," I protested, looking back at the stage as he dragged me away like a rag doll.

"What morshed?" Arman snapped.

There was no sign of the storyteller. The musicians had abandoned the stage. The puppeteers were jamming the delicate puppets into their suitcases. A few Simorgh feathers twirled a brief dance around the last remaining puppeteer, and then the square went dark. The power company, which was supposed to cut the electricity at the first sign of an air raid, must have been as surprised as we were and had only belatedly shut down its system.

Arman pulled me into a narrow side street.

"Let go of my arm!" I yelled.

"Not until we get home." He dragged me down the lane.

"Ow!" I cried, but I couldn't match his strength. I surrendered as my mind tried to piece together everything I had just witnessed.

We emerged from the lane onto a larger street. Men shouted and hauled equipment toward the fires.

My mother's familiar voice stopped us in our tracks. "Kimia!" she shouted, aiming her stout frame at us. Adding to my mother's bulk was the gray, raincoat-style Islamic uniform she wore. But this didn't seem to slow her as she sped over to us, her eyes radiating anger.

"Now you're gonna get it," Arman yelled in my ear.

I flinched, shielding my ear with my hand.

"Arman, Kimia!" My mother made her way across the street. Before I could protest, she grabbed my chin. "Where did you disappear to?"

I wanted to cry. "I went to—"

"She was just standing there," Arman interjected. "Right out in the open!"

"And what if another missile had hit?" my mother demanded. She slapped me hard. "Do you have any idea what I'm going through? Where is the naan?"

My face stung. "I . . . I . . ." Sobs were choking me.

Through a veil of tears, I saw Arman, whose righteousness had transformed to pity. His eyes were pinned to the ground, but his right hand twitched as if he wanted to put it on my mother's shoulder and shift her focus away from me.

My mother slapped me once again.

I heaved a startled breath, and my teeth became gritty with the soot in the air. Reeling in pain, I was about to yowl even harder when I felt the menacing glare of a bystander. The woman raced toward me, her stern face framed by the black chador flowing around her. I realized that my scarf had fallen from my head. The woman was coming over to chastise me for not wearing

my hijab properly. Quickly I pulled my scarf back up, and like a modern-day talisman, my covered hair sent the woman in another direction.

My mother, oblivious to all this, crushed my hand in her grip. “I’ll deal with you when we get home.”

I closed my eyes, willing myself to disappear, something I tried every time I got into trouble.

My mother dragged my listless body through a tangle of streets and alleys and into the courtyard of our house. The garden was quiet. I opened my eyes.

It didn’t work, I thought, disappointed that I lacked the magical skills to make myself vanish. An owl’s *huuu* filled the silent air.

The arched door groaned and creaked as we entered. My mother yanked me into the entry hall as Arman followed in silence. There was nothing he could do now. My mother lit several candles, and we began removing our street shoes, slipping into our dampae house slippers.

I caught my reflection in the taped-up mirror in the hallway. Dirty tear-streaks marred my face, my scarf sagged around my neck, and my hair was matted and tangled. My bloodshot eyes looked like those of a trapped animal.

Arman rapped his knuckles on the stained glass of the hallway door, as he did after every missile or bomb attack. Fortunately, the explosions hadn’t broken the mirror or the glass door. Like all our friends and neighbors, my mother had taped an X on each glass surface to save us some post-attack cleanup, since blast waves shattered glass as easily as they shattered the sound barrier. Once, when I asked my mother what would happen if a bomb or missile landed on the house itself, she said, “Well, housekeeping would have to take the back seat then, wouldn’t it?”

I was beginning to forget my predicament when my mother's roar crashed over my head. "So, you just forget the naan and decide, without letting anyone know, to go bazigooshi? To make mischief? You want me to suffer!" She grabbed my chin. "Do you want your brother to suffer?"

I waited until she let go of me, then followed her into the kitchen. As she warmed a kettle for tea, her expression became serene, as if nothing in the world could disturb her, but I knew there was more to come. I joined Arman at the kitchen table and felt a rush of gratitude for him as he kept his head down in solidarity.

With the kettle heating and the loose-leaf tea in the pot, my mother turned and put her hands on her hips. I picked at the peeling veneer on the table, avoiding her glare.

"What am I going to do with you? If you keep this up, you'll end up like a street whore! Dirt of the world on your head!" She was getting more and more worked up. "Arman, go get your baba's belt," she barked without taking her eyes off of me.

Arman hesitated.

"Go!" my mother exploded.



The next day I woke up to the sound of someone wailing. Felfel, who was sleeping soundly on my pillow, stretched luxuriously as I stirred. She began to purr when I patted her calico coat. I faced the direction of the loud sobs. It was our elderly neighbor, Mrs. Kermani. Had someone close to her died in the war, or was she just bemoaning the blanket of sadness that had cloaked

Shiraz lately? Even with my window closed, I could smell the foul smoke from the smoldering buildings. I wrinkled my nose and reached for the framed picture of my father on my bedside table. The motion brought a sharp pain to my shoulders, and I remembered last night's beating. Turning my wrist side to side revealed pink and purple marks covering older yellowing splotches.

I picked up my father's photo. Cheerful morning light shone on it, despite the bleak mood hovering over the house. My dad looked like a famous star in the spotlight.

A few days before my father left, I had asked him, "Why do they hate us?"

We were taking our usual walk, meandering through the garden around the willow tree and the rose bushes, holding hands.

"They don't even know us," my dad answered. "How could they hate us?" He took a long drag of his cigarette before passing it to me.

We had a secret tradition in which I finished off his cigarettes on the rare occasion when he smoked—never mind that I was a nine-year-old girl in post-revolution Iran. I took a couple of puffs and squashed the butt on the edge of the fountain.

"What is it like to lose your dad?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's really hard."

Earlier that day, my entire third-grade class had gone silent as Roxana entered the room, her face showing long, angry scratches. *Would I claw my own face if I lost someone I loved?* Roxana and I were good friends, and I hated that I hadn't been there when she found out. Even worse, I didn't know what to say. So I had just sat there, staring at my hands, my ears still ringing from the explosions that had shaken the earth the night before.

Her dad had been visiting his sick mother in Tehran when a Scud missile got him. The missile also killed his mother, along with the hosts and all the guests attending a six-year-old's birthday party. They were all in the same apartment complex.

Even though we were used to going to funerals, it didn't get easier.

"Baba, if they don't hate us, then why do they bomb us?"

My dad was about to say something, but instead he changed course so as not to disturb a caravan of ants that spread across the walkway. I followed suit.

Once, when I was four, we had come across a similar caravan on our walk. I had homed in on the biggest ant and crushed it with a rock.

"Why did you do that, Ooji?" my dad had asked, calling me by my nickname.

"I killed the big scary dragon," I said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Do you want to know what I see?" he asked. He sat next to me and pointed at the ants.

"That one there is Sara. She is the oldest daughter. She likes to tell jokes. Everyone always laughs at Sara's jokes. This one right here is Naneh Sheida. She makes the best baklava. And that little one over there, that's Sina. He is the youngest of all, just like you. He loves drawing with crayons. Do you know what Sina does with his crayons after he's done drawing a picture?"

I shook my head.

"He eats them! Who else does that?" he said, tickling me.

I laughed at first, but then, with a frown, I pointed at the rock covering the crushed ant.

"That was Baba Jafar," my dad whispered. "He was leaving for the store to buy Sina some more crayons."

Remembering that day from ages before, I looked up at my dad. He looked tired, and

gray hairs that hadn't been there a few months earlier had sprouted like spring grass shoots all over his head. I didn't ask him any more questions about Iraqi pilots and bombs. I just squeezed his hand, and we continued our walk around the rose bushes and the willow tree.

The morning he left, my baba had told me to be a good listener. "I'm going to come back with more stories," he whispered in my ear. Then he slung his bag over his shoulder and left for the airport. He was a civil engineer on a secret government assignment that he couldn't tell us anything about. He didn't know when he would come back either.

In the first few days, I kept track of his movements in my mind: *Now he is fastening his seat belt . . . Now he is in his Ahvaz office, learning about his assignment . . . Now he is having dinner.* But as the weeks rolled by, it all became fuzzy, a tangle of pointless tidbits. When we talked on the phone, I didn't have much to say. I had promised to be a good listener, but this was much harder than I thought.

"Baba Joon, come back safe, okay?" I said to his framed picture.

"The lost Youssef will come back to Canaan, do not despair. This forsaken land will become filled with flowers, do not despair." The verse from Hafez, Shiraz's very own poet, popped into my mind, consoling me. I kissed the cold glass covering my father's picture and set it back on my bedside table.

My mother, her eyes puffy and red, shuffled about the kitchen as she prepared breakfast. Laugh lines made parentheses around her pursed lips, but behind them the beast of her anger lurked, ready to pounce at the slightest provocation.

This wasn't the time to say anything about her misbuttoned blouse. I slid into a chair at the kitchen table, attempting to be casual. "Salaam," I whispered.

“Salaam,” she mumbled.

She shoved a plate in front of me. I picked at my food and glanced at the newspaper report on last night’s attack. There was a photo of a man holding a crying toddler, running toward the camera. They were both covered in dust, and clouds of smoke hovered over the rubble behind them.

“Another night you’ve ruined my sleep.” My mother clucked her tongue. “All the lines are busy too. I can’t get ahold of your father. Don’t you think I have enough to worry about?”

I took an inventory of the responses bouncing around inside my head before forcing out the words “I’m sorry, Maman.” Hearing my own cracked voice, my eyes welled up with tears.

“Don’t make me come searching for you,” she said with no malice.

““Oh, pilgrims on your way to Hajj, where are you going? Your beloved is right here. Come back, come back.”” I was reciting Rumi.

“I’ll die for you, my little poet.” My mother’s face brightened, and she kissed my head.

Arman, a halo of sleep hugging him tightly, frowned as he walked into the kitchen.

“Can’t you two at least quote the Koran once in a while, instead of all this Rumi nonsense?”

My mother and I looked at him.

“What? I’m the only one keeping this family out of trouble!” Arman sat and crossed his arms.

Normally I would have rolled my eyes and made a snide comment, but I remembered his hesitation the night before when my mother had ordered him to fetch baba’s belt.

“And we women are so lucky to have Rostam the Brave to protect us!” My mother smiled as she poured him some tea.

Arman shoved his chair back and stood up. “Stop mocking me!”

My mother kissed him on his head. “Sit down and eat, sweetheart. You need your strength.”

Arman sat, still cross, but soon he was distracted with buttering his naan. His sleepy face scrunched up in the same way it did when he solved math riddles.

My mother watched him as he slathered quince jam uniformly over the butter.

“Your brother worries about you too, Kimia. Thank God he, at least, knows how to act like an adult.”

She pulled Arman’s head to her. “Let me see your hair.”

“Why?” Arman asked, his mouth full of his meticulously wrapped bite of naan.

“Even children your age are going gray from this war.” My mother picked through his thick black hair. I had heard that rumor. I imagined what Arman and I would look like with gray hair.

“I’m a teenager!” Arman protested, but he didn’t move.

“Maybe in America. Here you’re my gol pesar.¹ I’m so proud of you for being so responsible . . . Always getting a perfect twenty in geometry.”

“Speaking of geometry, Reza told me he needs help studying for his math exam, but I told him I had to help you with shopping,” I blurted out.

Arman was about to interject, but at the sight of my bruised arms he swallowed his words.

My mother sat next to Arman and placed another piece of naan on his plate.

¹ boy flower

“Azita Khanom and Amu Doctor have to attend the funeral of Mrs. Zamani’s son, so I don’t think they’ll be able to help him,” I went on. “Poor Reza. I could just show him a few tricks and I bet he’d ace that exam . . .”

“Drink your milk,” my mother interrupted, pushing a small glass in front of me.

I complied. She must have woken up at the crack of dawn to stand in the rationed milk line. “Did you have milk and poetry this morning?” I asked, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

My mother nodded distractedly and faced the sun shining above the Poshteh Moleh Mountain through the kitchen window. Strands of her unkempt hair turned golden in the light. She cupped her hands around her warm tea.

“How was it?” I ventured.

She looked at me and blinked as if batting another thought away. “Oh, there were more poets than usual in the milk line today. Mr. Tavallali was there with a new poem. A pretty good one too.” She bent her head to her estekan, sipping from her half-finished tea. “You have until eleven. Then you must meet me at the chai khooneh. You will stay at Amu Doctor’s house, do you understand?”

I was already out of my chair. “Chashm, by my eye, I will! See you at eleven.”



With my scarf flung loosely about my head, I ran down the narrow, deserted alley. When two shapeless figures approached, I switched to a fast walk. There was a chance they might be

Hezbollahi, the slang we used to describe the religious right. These conservatives didn't approve of girls running, and even though there weren't actual laws stating such ridiculous things, when enough women had been harassed or arrested, we began realizing our limitations.

As soon as women were forced to wear hijab, I had insisted on cutting my hair and had pretended to be a boy. But people began to recognize me and I had to stop, as even little girls didn't escape punishment. When Sanaz's younger sister was whipped by a fearsome-looking paasdar² for being on a swing, wearing a skirt and no head cover, my mother forbade me from breaking any of the strange new moral laws. I wanted to argue that the demented paasdar was carrying a whip, looking for a target, that there hadn't been any other similar incidents, but we were already spending so much of our time fighting.

I passed the two strangers and broke into a run again. Soon I was standing breathlessly before the thick wooden door of the Pirooz home. I banged the Hand of Fatemeh door knocker. That familiar carved cherry barrier was the only thing standing between me and my best friend in the world. "Reza! Reza!" I yelled. A bearded man strolled by and shot me a look. I pulled my scarf over my exposed hair.

"Come on, Reza!" I murmured. I was about to knock again when the door cracked open. "You won't believe what happened last night—" I stopped short as the door opened more fully and revealed Reza's dad, Dr. Pirooz.

"Good morning, golam,³" he said.

"Oh, hi, Amu Doctor, I thought—I . . ."

² member of the Revolutionary Guard

³ my flower

“You’re looking for Reza, I presume?” Amu Doctor smiled.

“Yes!” I yelped.

I bit my lower lip, regretting my clear lack of eloquence. Amu Doctor, with his smart suit, his perfectly combed hair and trimmed mustache, made me suddenly self-conscious. I loved Dr. Pirooz like he was family. Ever since I could remember, I referred to him as my uncle, calling him Amu ⁴Doctor, but his presence made me want to be more dignified and refined than I often appeared.

As Amu Doctor opened the door wider, I saw him, and all my frustrations vanished. Reza was almost a year older than me, but a bit shorter and younger looking. Clad in his favorite army fatigue jacket, he, too, spotted me and ran to the door.

“Kimia!” Reza exclaimed, yanking his Walkman headphones off his head.

“Reza, do you want to, uh . . .” I faltered. I hadn’t planned on Amu Doctor’s presence.

But Amu Doctor simply pushed Reza out the door.

“You two be careful out there, okay?”

We nodded simultaneously.

“Hey, are you bringing that?” I pointed to his Walkman. Reza had acquired it the previous summer on a lucky afternoon while vacationing in Dubai. He and the device had been nearly inseparable ever since. He caressed the chunky buttons of the blue-and-silver cassette player. There were times when we needed to be empty-handed and quick, like two animals. My excited face made it clear today was one of those days. He took the Walkman off carefully and handed it to his father.

⁴ paternal uncle

“Now get out of here before your mother comes!” Amu Doctor said with a wink.

One of the new Islamic laws forbade boys and girls from touching one another, but the alley looked empty and my heart was leaping with joy. I grabbed Reza’s hand and we ran, giggles falling like scattered cherry blossoms behind us.

“Do you have water today?” I yelled.

“No, do you have electricity?” Reza yelled back.

“No!” I said and we both erupted in laughter.

We rounded a corner, still laughing. Three men in dark clothes and too much facial hair paused their conversation when they heard our chuckles. We unclasped our hands in a flash, shut our mouths, and looked down, assuming the most somber looks we could muster.

With my eyes still on the ground, I whispered, “Let’s go see what the missile did!”

“Are you crazy?” Reza said, without looking at me. “We’ll get in trouble.”

“Not if they don’t catch us!”

Reza grumbled something, but let me lead the way.

As we got closer to the impact site, the stench of the smoldering buildings grew stronger. The smell brought with it flashes of the chaos, Arman’s silent screams, and the beating. I covered my nose and mouth with my scarf. Reza brought his forearm to his face, breathing into his jacket sleeve. We stuck to the alleys to avoid crowds on the larger streets. When the odor no longer bothered me, I brought my head close to Reza’s and whispered, “I was there.”

“Where the missile hit?” he asked, his voice high with incredulity.

“No, divooneh,⁵ at the square! There was a storyteller I’ve never seen before. He was . . . strange, but, well, I don’t know . . .” I switched to a whisper. “I think he’s a magician or, at the very least, a friend to the jinn⁶ folks.”

Reza whispered back, “That’s nonsense, plus you shouldn’t be talking about magic. The imam . . .”

I hushed him as I heard some men shout from around the corner.

“What?” Reza mouthed.

I eased a glance around the corner and then tugged on Reza’s shirt. “Look!”

We both stared at the rubble of an office building that had collapsed onto the adjacent kabob shop.

Reza stood transfixed. “When we had out of town guests, my baba brought home kabob barg from there.” He pointed to the hulking pile.

Volunteers were combing through the rubble. I realized we were too exposed.

“Come on.” I pulled at Reza again.

We found a partially destroyed garden wall and ducked behind it.

“Do you think there are dead people under all that?” Reza asked.

“Probably,” I replied with a shrug, but I already knew no missing people had been reported in the paper.

⁵ silly

⁶ supernatural beings held responsible for misfortune, possession, and mischief-making

Somehow that fib made the moment more exciting and our adventure more important. Without warning, I jumped over the lowest part of the wall and scrambled up the rubble pile. Since girls were not allowed to climb, I had to be lightning quick.

“Kimia!” Reza hissed.

But I climbed on. About two-thirds of the way up the rubble pile, I pulled a bright red scarf from a crevice. Despite the dust, it was in good condition and its heavy silkiness felt sublime in my hands. I tied it around my neck as if it were a cape and stood like a hijabi superhero with my fists on my hips. Reza started laughing. A couple of workmen spotted me and yelled. Reza lost his smile and motioned frantically. I glanced back at the workmen: they were clambering over the rubble toward me. I took one more look around from my perch, spread my arms out wide, and ran down the mountain of destruction, my red cape flying behind me.