

The Lip Reader

By Michael Thal

Michael Thal
17914 Magnolia Blvd. #301
Encino, CA 91316
64,045

Dedication

In loving memory of Jila.

Preface

Four months before her death, Zhila noticed a suspicious looking mole on my back. “This looks dangerous,” she signed. “Have it checked out.”

Devastated by her dying and subsequent death, I completely forgot about the mole as I precariously attempted to survive without her. At the unveiling of her headstone, Zhila’s brother, a doctor, noticed a mole on my face and said, “That’s cancer!” so I made an appointment to get it checked out.

The dermatologist looked at the mole my brother-in-law discovered and said, “That’s nothing.” Then I directed him to Zhila’s mole sighting on my back, and he said, “Now, that’s something!” He biopsied it and reported, “You have cancer.”

I was almost happy with this news. I went into the surgery hoping I wouldn’t make it so that I could join the love of my life. The surgery lasted more than five hours, but I survived.

I needed to do something—anything, to bring Zhila back to me, so I wrote down every memory I had of the stories she told me about her childhood, college life, early adult years as a geologist, and eventual emigration to the United States.

Many of Zhila’s stories in this novel were touched on in my award-winning piece written for the 73rd Annual Writer’s Digest Writing Competition of the same title.

After the mole surgery, I decided to expand “The Lip Reader” to a full-fledged novel, memorializing my intelligent, sweet, and empathetic Deaf angel.

The names have been changed for privacy concerns, while embellishing events for continuity and literary considerations.

I hope Zhila Shirazi’s life touches you as much as it touched me.

Michael Thal

Chapter 1

December 2014

My name is Zhila Shirazi, grandniece of Rabbi Yousef Kohani Hamdani. I tell that to all my Jewish friends. Only the orthodox are impressed. My father is Solomon, a pharmacist, and my mom, Sara, is a housewife. I have two younger sisters, Zandra and Zanna, as well as a younger brother, Ziggy. Zandra is a pharmacist, Zanna is a dentist, and Ziggy is a doctor.

I once asked my mother, “Why the same first letter in all our names?”

Maamaan said, “I wanted my children to feel as if they were part of a unit.”

“Since when is a letter a unit?” Sarcasm dripped from my voice.

She thought for a second and then said, “Your clothes would go to Zandra, and hers to Zanna. If I used the same initial in your names, it would be easier not to lose clothes at school.”

“How about Ziggy? Why him?”

“So you’re all part of the same unit.” Maamaan smiled contentedly.

I have a few medical problems, but the most severe condition is deafness. Even with my cochlear implant, most voices elude me. I rely on lip reading to understand my friends and family. Mickey, who is also deaf, is easy to understand. Sixteen years ago, when we met, he insisted we learn American Sign Language (ASL) together. At first I was reluctant, but soon realized the wisdom of that request. So he took the classes, and when he saw me, taught me what he learned.

But my real story begins in Tehran...

Book 1

Tehran, Iran

Chapter 2

Winter 1959

When I was nine, I read an article in the *Ettela'at*, our morning newspaper, about an audiologist fitting a deaf child with hearing aids. Under the picture of the little girl with dark hair and owl eyes read a caption, "Oh my! I can hear my voice!" Tears stained her smiling face.

That was when I knew I had to have a pair of hearing aids, too. So I lobbied my mother. I showed her the article and picture, but all Maamaan did was smile and nod. Still, it was a start.

One day, I brought home my report card showing poor progress in math. My parents wanted to hire a tutor. I told them to invest their money in hearing aids. "If I could hear the teacher, I'd do a lot better in class."

They didn't seem to care.

One evening in early February Papa sat in his leather lounge chair smoking a cigarette and Maamaan was crocheting a blanket, so I tried again. Standing on the Persian rug between my parents, I clapped my hands to grab their attention and made my case. "I can't hear my voice." I pointed to Maamaan. "And I don't have the slightest idea what you and Papa sound like. My grades in school suffer because when the teacher turns her back I miss it all." I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at Maamaan. "I want hearing aids, now!"

"Go to bed. It's late. Your father and I will discuss it and get back to you." She resumed her crocheting. At least they would talk about it. That was a start.

I understood, even then why my parents were uncomfortable about my wearing hearing aids. In Iran it wasn't safe to be different. Being Jewish in a Muslim country was difficult enough, but if an offspring had a disability, people hid that fact from family and friends.

People with disabilities in mid-twentieth century Iran were considered tragic, pitiful human beings unfit and unable to contribute to society. Their only service was as objects of ridicule and entertainment in circuses and exhibitions.

Children like me were assumed to be abnormal and feeble minded. Many of us were forced to undergo sterilization so as not to pass on the deaf, blind, or other disabling gene to our offspring.

My parents didn't want our family or neighbors to know I was deaf. Getting me hearing aids would be evidence of my inferiority and prove their inability to sire a healthy, normal child. (No one would notice my two healthy younger siblings. They'd just point fingers at the deaf child.)

So my parents procrastinated until I forced the issue. That day came in early March when I came home dripping wet, crying, and bleeding from the right side of my head.

"Oh my god, Zhila, what happened?" Maamaan dropped a duster on the living room table and rushed to my side. I kicked off my boots by the front door alcove and ran to my room.

"Nothing!" I slammed the door behind me.

Maamaan waited a few minutes, and then knocked softly on my bedroom door.

"Go away!" I screamed.

She ignored me, pushed her way in and sat on my bed. "Let me look at that." She pointed to the wound on my head caked with dried blood. "I need to clean it." She placed the first aid kit on the night table, wet a ball of cotton with hydrogen peroxide, and said, "This will sting."

"Ouch!" I pulled away.

“It needs to be cleaned or it will get infected. Sit still.”

As she worked, Maamaan asked, “Who did this to you?”

“My teacher!” I broke down and cried in her arms.

When the shaking and sobs subsided, Maamaan pushed me to arm’s length. “Tell me what happened.”

I said, “ We were working on a math problem. Mrs. Saidi’s back was to the class as she spoke to us. I had no idea that she called on me to come up to the board to solve a problem.

“When Mrs. Saidi turned around, her face was beet red. She looked at me with fire in her eyes. ‘Miss Shirazi, when I speak to you I expect a response.’ She turned toward the board and put up another problem. Even I could hear the scraping chalk noise echoing in the room.

“Mrs. Saidi turned around her face even redder. She yelled at me so hard stray spittle took flight and landed in my hair.

“At that second, a loud bang shook the room as windows rattled. Rain pelted against the school building. This interruption didn’t shake Mrs. Saidi’s anger or stop her furious storm of words.”

Maamaan put a Band Aid on the side of my head and then closed the first aid kit. “What happened next?”

Stifling sniffles, I said, “She ordered me to stand by the door, so I moved fast. With her back to me she said something to the class, and a few students laughed.”

Mrs. Saidi turned to face me. “Why are you still here?”

“I didn’t know what she was talking about, and my face probably showed it. Mrs. Saidi grasped a sharp pencil from behind her ear and gouged it into my temple.”

“That should wake you up, you stupid Jew,” Mrs. Saidi said. “Now get out of my class and don’t come back until you learn respect.”

I stared into Maamaan’s sad eyes. “So I stood under an awning for thirty minutes as cold wind blew rain and wet snow into my face. Finally Mrs. Saidi called me back into the classroom.”

I sneezed and Maamaan ordered me to get out of my damp clothes and take a shower.

As I undressed I said, “If I had hearing aids this wouldn’t have happened.”

Maamaan got off the bed and held me in her arms. Then she pulled away and said, “For your twelfth birthday we’ll see an audiologist.”

Although that was three years away, I had a most delightful shower.

Chapter 3

January 1962

I never looked forward to a birthday more than my twelfth. In January 1962, the Beatles were becoming famous, Chubby Checker taught the world to twist, “The Parent Trap” was a huge Disney hit, and for me it was Operation Hearing Aids.

It was a Wednesday, so as usual, I walked to school with cousin Parry, my favorite Aunt Sabra’s daughter. Sixth grade was so much better than Mrs. Saidi’s fourth grade class not only

because Parry was in my room, but also our teacher, Miss Avedisian, was really nice. She was the best teacher I had ever had at Besadeh Elementary, a school founded by a Christian woman who wanted to educate young girls, no matter what their religion.

Miss Avedisian knew about my deafness because Parry told her. During the first day of class she stopped at Miss A's desk while I stood at the door. She whispered something to the teacher, and Miss A looked at me and smiled.

That's all it took. Miss Avedisian never spoke with her back to the class. When she asked me a question, she looked at me and spoke slowly to make sure I understood. My grades skyrocketed and for once I was happy.

But, I still wanted hearing aids, so when school let out early that Wednesday afternoon, I ran to our Kings Garden home with Parry in my wake.

At a busy intersection, my cousin asked, "What's the big rush?" Even with the cold weather, beads of sweat formed on her brow.

Large trucks, small cars, and motorcycles sped by. "I told you already. Maamaan promised me hearing aids. We go get them today." The light changed and I was off. I knew I was being rude to my cousin and best friend, but I was too excited. I left Parry at the corner shaking her head.

When I arrived home all sweaty with my light blue roosari wrapped around my neck and not covering my head, Maamaan scowled. "Go take a shower, change clothes and we go."

"But we'll be late," I cried.

Maamaan stood with her hands on her hips with an apron covering her huge belly. "We have an hour. Plenty of time."

Supergirl couldn't have showered and dressed faster. Soon Maamaan and I headed for the hustle and bustle of downtown Tehran. I walked quickly ahead of her and she waddled. Maamaan was six months pregnant.

Green road signs in Farsi directed us along our way with English translations in block letters for foreigners.

From Darband Street, a major thoroughfare near Sa'dabad Palace, home to the Shah, we headed East on Tajik and entered a medical center at the end of the block.

In the audiologist's waiting room Maamaan filled out the requisite forms and passed them to a receptionist. According to her nameplate, she was Dalia. She puffed at brown bangs covering her eyes. "Dr. Mohammadi will be with you shortly. Have a seat."

I was too excited to sit. Very soon I'd be able to hear. I imagined listening to the Beatles, hearing the voice of my wonderful teacher, or perhaps the cries of my baby brother or sister after it was born. The possibilities were endless.

Hanging in a frame on the wall in the waiting room was a picture of an ear showing the Ear Canal, Middle Ear, Inner Ear, and Eustachian Tube. As I studied the picture Maamaan struggled to her feet. So I gave her a hand and we entered Dr. Mohammadi's office.

Dr. Mohammadi had dark brown hair, bushy eyebrows, and a kind face. Only a chipped front tooth distracted the glow of his expansive smile.

"Welcome, young lady," he said to me offering his hand, which I shook warmly.

"I want you to fit me with hearing aids," I said.

He glanced at my mother and offered her a seat near his desk. "For that we'll need to run a few tests." He spoke slowly and distinctly, just like Miss Avedisian.

The audiologist escorted me to a glass-enclosed booth. “We’ll do Pure Tone Testing first. You’ll sit on that chair and place those headphones over your ears. If and when you hear a sound, raise your left hand. Okay?”

I nodded and entered the booth. Once the headphones were in place, a loud beep assaulted my right ear. Quickly, I raised my left hand.

And so it went as he tested both ears. I hardly heard any beeps from my right ear, but did better with the left one. Sometimes long seconds would pass before I heard a noise, and most of them were faint as if they were sent from far away. At least I heard something, which boosted my faith that soon I’d hear people speaking and be able to listen to music.

After the “Pure-Tone Testing” he gave me “The Speech Test.” Dr. Mohammadi had me keep the headphones on while he spoke to me and instructed me to repeat what I heard. Most of the words he spoke into my right ear I couldn’t hear at all. The words in my left made little sense, but I told him what I thought I heard.

He performed a few more tests, but I didn’t need to give a response to those. He just stuck instruments into my ears, looked at his gadgets, and jotted down notes. Once finished, he spent some time at his desk reviewing test results and making charts.

When Dr. Mohammadi was finished he spoke quickly to my mother. Then he looked at me. “You have a profound hearing loss in your right ear.”

“What does that mean?” I stared at his chipped tooth waiting for an answer.

“You have difficulty hearing sounds in your right ear with amplification of 80 decibels or more. Technically speaking, you’re legally deaf in your right ear. No hearing aid made today can help you.”

“And my left ear?”

“You have a severe loss in that ear. With the help of a very powerful hearing aid you will understand some speech.”

Dr. Mohammadi was silent for a few seconds, his brow furrowed in thought. “Zhila, your ears lack cilia, or the ‘hair-like’ fibers attached to a membrane in the Inner Ear. When the membrane moves, it activates the cilia for those frequencies, which make up that particular sound. When the cilia are activated, an electrical signal is sent to the brain telling it which frequencies are being heard. According to your medical records, meningitis burned out many of the cilia in your ears, causing deafness.”

Then the audiologist turned to Maamaan, but continued speaking slowly for my benefit. “Zhila is rarely stimulated by sound unless the noise exceeds 60 decibels.”

“How loud is 60 decibels?” Maamaan asked.

“Right now I’m speaking to you at about 30 decibels. Zhila can’t hear me. If I stepped about a meter from you, my voice would raise to 60. A vacuum cleaner makes noises around 70. Understand?”

Maamaan and I nodded.

Dr. Mohammadi continued. “Zhila can hear a fire engine coming, a school bell ring, but to comprehend human speech she reads lips.” He then looked at me. “You’re an amazing lip reader. Very impressive.”

I smiled weakly.

“I don’t know what you just said. Only your lips moved,” Maamaan said.

I grinned. “Welcome to my world, Maamaan.”

I turned back to Dr. Mohammadi. "When can I get the hearing aid?"

"The hearing aid you need is top of the line and made by an American company." He went over to a cabinet and pulled out a box the size of a book. "Here's what it looks like."

In a red felt box sat a smaller box. Dr. Mohammadi connected a wire from the metal rectangular object to an earplug. "This receiver relays sound to the plug and the hearing impaired person can hear that amplified noise."

"Can I try it?"

"Sorry, this device won't help. Its power output is too weak for you."

"What will help me?"

"It would be a Flickriver made by Zenith."

"How much would that cost?" I held my breath afraid of the answer.

"In American dollars it would cost around four thousand, four hundred."

"And in Rials?" I asked.

"A little over one hundred and twenty-nine million."

Maamaan gasped, stood, and exited Dr. Mohammadi's office. She hastily wrote a check to Dahlia for the visit, and signaled me to follow.

Maamaan walked stone-faced down Tajik Road and onto Darband.

I ran ahead and then walked backward. "Can I have the hearing aid?"

"It's too expensive."

"I'll get a job. I'll babysit for the neighbor's kids. I'll pay."

Maamaan found the energy to walk briskly past me.

Then I screamed, "Maamaan, I want the hearing aid."

She didn't respond, just walked faster.

"Please, Maamaan!"

Maamaan crossed the street and headed for Kings Garden. The bottom of her long winter coat flapped in the cold wind.

I ran to catch up. "You don't want people knowing. You don't want them to talk. Your perfect daughter isn't so perfect. God forbid they see the hearing aid box and know the truth. I'm deaf, Maamaan. You heard the man, but I want to hear. I want to listen to music. Hear the laughter of my friends at school. I don't want to be so different from everyone."

Pedestrians stopped and people stuck their heads out of windows staring.

Maamaan halted in mid stride, her face flush with anger. She turned toward me, and did something she'd never done before. She slapped me. "NO! Now don't speak about it again."

I trailed behind my mother that day covering my face with my roosari as tears fell from my eyes. I'd never trust Maamaan again.

Chapter 4

April 1962

Maamaan slept soundly on a queen-sized bed. Next to the bed stood a nightstand filled with medical supplies belonging to Aunt Sabra, Maamaan's oldest sister, and her midwife. A five-drawer mahogany chest matching the bed stood on the opposite side of the room, and a blanket chest, covered by a small Persian rug, lay at the foot of the bed.

"You were born right here twelve years ago," Aunt Sabra whispered to me.

"Yes, I know. You told me when Zandra was born."

Maamaan's eyes flickered open.

Aunt Sabra hovered over my mother's bed holding a damp cloth to her brow.

I knelt on the Persian carpet at the other side of the bed to read my aunt's plump red lips as she spoke to my mother. "The birth of your fourth child will be amazing and powerful. I sense a girl and she will become a healer one day."

Maamaan smiled.

Before she went into labor, I had asked Maamaan why she wouldn't have her baby in the hospital. She'd said, "Having my child at home is empowering and spiritual. It even makes me a better mother."

"You sure you gave birth to me at home?" I asked with a grin.

She scowled and pushed me away. She was still holding a grudge four months after our fight about the hearing aids. She blamed me for the slap across my face, believing I forced her to do it since I'd behaved badly.

Maybe I've forgiven her, but I'd never forget. So occasionally I'd let slip a furtive remark.

Maamaan's sudden high-pitched shriek brought me back to the present.

Aunt Sabra placed a pillow against my mother's back as she rolled her on her side.

"Trust your body's instincts, Sara. Breathe deeply."

Maamaan followed her sister's orders and slowly, she began to calm.

"We will create the best position for you and your baby. Now rest."

Aunt Sabra gestured for me to follow her out of the room. She led me to the kitchen where she began to prepare tea and fill a plate with Persian cookies called koloochehs.

I admired the simplicity of her white blouse and black skirt. "I love your outfit. Where did you buy it?"

"Actually, I bought the fabric at the Grand Bazaar in southern Tehran and made the outfits myself."

I gaped. "You do such beautiful work, Aunt Sabra."

She carried the koloochehs and glasses of tea on a tray to the kitchen table. Then I said, "Wouldn't they make Maamaan more comfortable and give her pain medication in a hospital?"

Aunt Sabra shook her head vehemently, her black hair bounced on her shoulders. "Iranian hospitals view pregnancy as high risk and births as dangerous procedures needing technological intervention."

I nodded as she sipped her tea and nibbled on a koloocheh. "As a midwife, I know pregnancy and birth are natural processes. As a Jew I believe the child's life begins at birth completely free of sin. So why should a good Jewish girl start life surrounded by such negativity?"

"Maamaan is having a girl?" I squealed.

“I think so.”

I plucked a cookie from the plate and dunked it into my tea as Sabra continued, “Women in Iranian hospitals don’t receive much attention. Their husbands don’t visit and family members are not allowed in during the birthing process. At home we can make her comfortable, give her support, and let her experience a birth as free of pain as possible.”

A howl echoed from the bedroom. Aunt Sabra put down her cup and darted toward her sister out of the kitchen and down the long corridor.

“That’s minimal pain?” I mumbled. “I think I’ll have my kids in a hospital.” Then I scurried off in my aunt’s wake.

When I reached my mother’s bedside, she was breathing in short gasps. With the soothing words from her sister, Maamaan calmed down and her breaths became long and deep.

It was just the three of us in the house. My brother, Ziggy, was next door playing with his friend and Zandra was at Aunt Rebecca’s home. Naturally, my father was at the pharmacy working.

Maamaan screamed again. Her dark hair was matted against her face and tears stained her cheeks.

“Can’t you do something?” I shrieked.

Aunt Sabra stared at me with cold brown eyes. “You either be quiet and do as I say or leave this room now.”

I nodded.

“You’re fully dilated. It’s time to push,” my aunt told Maamaan, and then looked at me.

“Take her hand and try to give her comfort.”

I did what she said, and Maamaan pushed, screamed and cursed. “Pedarsag! Keer bokhor!”

I’d never heard such vulgarity from anyone, including my grandpa.

Sabra took Maamaan’s face in her hands and reminded her how to breathe. “Short breaths. Short breaths. That’s right. Now push!”

As Maamaan pushed, her face reddened like an apple.

Aunt Sabra tapped me to grab my attention. “Go to the foot of the bed and get ready to catch the baby when she comes.”

Catch the baby? I was to hold my new sister first? “What if I drop her?”

“You won’t.”

Then with one loud shriek and a push, a little head peeked out from its hiding place.

“Just one more push and you’re finished, Sara,” my aunt said.

That’s when a gorgeous baby plopped into my arms and tears of joy streamed down my cheeks. “You were right, Sabra. It’s a girl!”

“First, I need to cut the umbilical cord.” Sabra snipped the long fleshy tube with sterile scissors taken from a sealed surgical kit. Then she told me, “Now place your sister on your mother’s chest.”

I carefully handed the baby to my mother who opened her arms in greeting.

Sabra walked around to the side of the bed and helped Maamaan to a sitting position reinforced by many pillows. She then guided the baby to Maamaan's breast and the infant began to suck.

Aunt Sabra said, "The baby's sucking action stimulates the uterus and causes it to contract closing blood vessels. It will reduce the mother's bleeding and help mother and child to bond."

My aunt further explained that early bonding allows the baby to relax. She would also get the benefit of drinking colostrum, a sticky liquid filled with vitamins and protein that contained antibodies which fought bacteria and built the baby's immune system.

I stared at the miracle, who became known as Zanna. Somehow I knew this tiny pink baby wrapped up in a swaddling cloth would one day become my best friend.

Chapter 5

September 1962

In my home, dinnertime was quiet time. Papa wanted to eat his meal in peace, so when he was at the table, us kids weren't permitted to talk. That was fine with me because it was really tough to lip-read multiple conversations.

On the evening of my good news, Papa was working late at the pharmacy. My sister, Zandra, and I sat next to each other on the padded benches in the kitchen nook chatting and giggling while Maamaan gave the baby a bottle of milk in her highchair at the foot of the table.

Our brother, Ziggy, gobbled down three beef kabobs, but wouldn't eat his broccoli. "May I be excused?" he asked Maamaan while scowling at us for ignoring him during dinner.

"After you eat your broccoli." Maamaan held Zanna over her shoulder and patted her back as she waited for a burp. And when it came, Zandra and I broke up into hysterics like we'd just heard the best joke ever.

"Quiet!" Maamaan barked.

Zanna burst into frightened tears at Maamaan's screaming.

Ziggy took advantage and scooted away from the table, down the hallway, and out of sight.

Zandra and I nibbled at our food, and then she elbowed me. "Zhila, you seem very happy. What's up?"

I felt my face flush. "I met a new friend today at school."

Zandra's brown eyes widened, "Really? What's her name? How did you meet?"

Exuberantly, I turned to face my sister. "Her name is Goli and she's in my math class. She sits next to me, but that's not how we met."

Zandra's eyebrows jettisoned as she scooped up a spoonful of rice. "So tell me."

"I'd left my geography class and was hurrying to math when I saw two girls headed for a collision. One was reading a book and walking slowly, the other touching a wall with one hand as she crept along at a snail's pace."

"So what happened?"

"They bumped into each other. Books scattered everywhere. The girls in the hallway who stopped to gawk at the scene giggled and pointed."

"What did you do?" Zandra asked.

"The book reader yelled at the wall hugger, 'What's wrong with you? Don't you look where you're going?' I jumped in and said, 'One could ask the same of you.'" Then I picked up the novel she was reading and handed it to her. But the hall hugger was different."

"How?" Zandra asked.

"She had trouble finding her books, so I gathered them up for her as she stood crying. I told her, 'No problem, here are all your things.'" Then I looked at her closely, 'You're in my Algebra class, aren't you?' She wiped her tear-stained cheeks with the white sleeve of her blouse and shrugged. She headed down the hall to our math class. I followed next to her. Then I said, 'I'm Zhila. What's your name?'"

"What did she say?" my sister asked.

"Goli." Then she thanked me for helping her.

Zandra nodded as I stabbed a spear of broccoli from my plate and chewed. “After math class, Goli and I had lunch and got to know each other.”

“What’s she like besides klutzy?” Zandra asked.

“She’s visually impaired. That’s why she has trouble walking the hallways.”

Zandra frowned. The wheels in her head were turning. Then she finally perked up with a glowing smile. “Sounds like you two would make a good pair. She can be your ears and you her eyes.”

As the weeks passed, Zandra’s observation proved true. Goli and I were a perfect match for best friends. I read material too small for her to see, and she told me what people said that I missed reading on their lips.

I didn’t tell Goli about my hearing problem until years later, but I’m sure she knew. I never accepted phone calls and if she ever looked away while talking to me, she always had to repeat herself, which said a lot about her respect for my privacy.

I’m sure some girls made fun of me at school, but Goli always had my back. What happened six months later proves my point.

One beautiful spring day, Goli and I were walking to her home, a few kilometers from mine. We strolled along Sajjad Road, a tree-lined thoroughfare that didn’t have sidewalks. Like all Persians, we walked in the street. I took the outside position while Goli walked closer to the curb. She chatted about some boy she liked in her neighborhood, but couldn’t get him to like her. I focused on her mouth and paid little attention to anything else.

Suddenly, my right arm was abruptly tugged and I crashed to the concrete as a car whizzed by. Goli raised her fist and screamed a few curses in Arabic at the driver. Then she helped me to my feet. “He almost hit you! You okay?” she asked.

I brushed off dirt from my school uniform and nodded. “Thanks for saving me.”

She smiled and we turned the next corner to Shore Boulevard and her home.

Unfortunately, Goli wasn’t with me the next time a car whizzed by. The results that day were dramatically different.

Chapter 6

April 1963

When I was in the eighth grade, I had an accident that affected the rest of my life. At that time, my father owned Farvardin Pharmacy, a small drugstore on Daneshgah Jang Boulevard at the edge of District 10. It was a busy shop that provided our family with all the resources we needed to support our middle-class life-style.

It was windy that April day as I walked home from Goli's house along Hashemi Street wearing my favorite pink roosari. The pink scarf struggled to contain my unruly and lengthy dark brown hair, which was tossed every which way by the wind.

Hashemi Street, located in District 10, the most populated of Tehran's twenty-two municipal districts, is in the western part of the capital. It's one of the older streets in Tehran and is home to many old mansions set back on expansive lawns, each house surrounded by brick walls or metal fences.

On this blustery day traffic was light. I held onto my book bag with one hand and tried hopelessly not to lose my scarf. A gust of wind won the battle, taking hold of my roosari and tossing it along the roadside several meters in front of me.

I rushed over to pick it up, but by the time I bent over, the roosari was off again, flying in the air as if it had grown wings. I pursued it along the road and when I got close, stomped on the scarf with my booted foot. "Got ya!"

When I leaned over to retrieve my miscreant scarf, something whizzed by, clipped me hard on my backside, and tossed me into the muddy gutter.

I don't know how long I lay there, dirty and in pain. But finally I managed to muster up the strength to push myself to my knees. The pain in my lower back nearly made me pass out. Getting to my feet was a herculean effort, but I knew my father's pharmacy was only a block away. If I could only get there, Papa would know what to do and how to care for me.

With that positive message firmly in my mind, I tried not to think about the half-kilometer distance between Hashemi Street and the pharmacy, but it seemed as hopeless as walking the 2000 kilometers to the Black Sea.

A sharp pain shot from my back down to my legs. I stopped to gulp air; the pain made my breathing come in short, shallow gasps. I spotted a tree on the side of the street in front of a wrought iron fence surrounding a stately Victorian mansion. I made my way over and stopped to enlist its support by plastering my back to its rough bark and pressed, relieving a bit of pressure. Once rested, I reluctantly continued.

Finally, I reached Daneshgah Jang Blvd and the small pharmacy occupying the corner lot. I forced myself to cross the street, lift my feet over the curb, and reach the Farvardin Pharmacy parking lot.

By the time I dragged myself to the heavy pharmacy glass doors, I was gasping for air. A middle-aged man burst through the doors clutching a package and in his rush, bumped me with his bag. Excruciating pain exploded and I collapsed and, thankfully, fainted.

About an hour later, my eyes fluttered open. I was on an old couch in the back room of my father's pharmacy. Papa looked down at me with concern. "What happened to you? How did you become such a mess?"

I struggled to make myself comfortable wincing in pain. "Walking home. Wind. Hit by a car." Then, I was tossed back into painless darkness.

The next time I awoke Maamaan was wringing her hands as she perched in a chair beside me. "Zhila, take this." She handed me a white pill. "It'll help with the pain."

I struggled to sit up and downed the pill with gulps of water. Soon, I was sleeping again.

Papa woke me at closing time. "Time to go home. Think you can walk?"

"I'll try," I said. And was surprised at how much better I felt. But when I attempted to stand, a fierce stab of pain took my breath away.

Papa pushed his silver hair away from his eyes. His black eyebrows scrunched together in thought. "Lie down on the couch, Zhila-joon, but face down."

He left, but soon returned with a needle filled with a clear liquid. "What's that?"

"Cortisone. Now, where exactly is the pain coming from?"

I pointed to my left hip.

Papa pulled my blouse from the back of my skirt. "This black and blue mark is huge." He felt around the tender area with his cold hands pushing and poking until I screamed.

"Found it!" he said in triumph. He wiped the area with disinfectant and injected me with a lightning bolt of fire.

Papa let me recover for a few minutes before returning. He said something, but since I wasn't looking at him, I asked him to repeat it. "Can you stand now?"

"I don't know."

"Try."

Reluctantly, I did and was amazed that the pain was gone. It was as if the accident never happened.

“Wow! Papa, you are a wizard. So much better.”

A smile erupted on his handsome tanned face. He extended a strong hand and said,
“Let’s go home.”

Little did I realize at the time, the effects of this incident would haunt me for a lifetime.

Chapter 7

October 1964

There are two educational systems in Iran—private and public. If families can't afford to enroll their children in private schools, they send them to the public system. The private schools attract the best teachers because they offer higher salaries and the students are motivated to learn. In both systems boys and girls are segregated. My sisters and I went to a private girls' school located in our neighborhood. They weren't the best in Tehran, but they were adequate.

Ziggy, three years younger than me, attended the Rouzbeh School. The institution was known for its rigorous curriculum and the best in our district for sixth grade boys. However, Ziggy had a problem. He didn't like to read, rarely completed his assignments, and resented being told what to do.

One day a letter came from the school. It informed my parents that Ziggy was failing all his subjects and if he didn't show dramatic improvement he would be expelled. Translation: Ziggy would be forced to attend a public school and humiliate his family.

Papa sat my brother down at the kitchen table, showed him the letter, and then screamed, "What's wrong with you? How could you do this to me? You are an embarrassment to our family." On and on he ranted red-faced: spittle flying helter-skelter. Then he stormed out of the kitchen.

The Shirazi living room was sacred ground. It was used only when guests visited. The plush half circular couch was covered with plastic. A knee-high coffee table sat atop of an expensive Persian rug with a few comfortable chairs completing the effect.

So when Maamaan took Ziggy's hand, walked him into the living room and invited him to sit on the couch, Ziggy knew she meant business, but wasn't sure what she had on her mind. Being eleven years old, he took it in stride and plopped down on the brown couch that he was told never to sit on. Our mother gently took his hand.

When Papa is angry he shouts. Maamaan, on the other hand, whispers. Zandra and I stood in the shadows and eavesdropped. Between her good ears and my lip-reading skills, we were able to figure out the conversation.

Maamaan wagged her finger at him. "You are our only son, Ziggy-joon. You will carry our name to your children, and they to theirs. Do you want people to think the Shirazis are trash? If you get thrown out of Rouzbeh and forced to go to Toloo High School that's what everyone will think. Do you want that?"

Ziggy's eyes filled with tears. Toloo was known for its bad boys who were constantly getting into trouble with the police. The SAVAK, or secret police, were sometimes involved with investigations.

My brother ran his fingers through his dark blond hair. "I'll try to do better."

"I'm counting on it," Maamaan said. She pointed to the door. "Now get off my couch."

Ziggy ran for the back door and out of sight.

I followed him to the apple tree in our backyard and watched as he climbed to the top limb, his favorite place to think.

I didn't like to climb trees, but I had to talk to my brother.

When I grabbed the lowest branch to boost myself onto the tree, a sharp pain ran down my leg, a reminder of the car accident I had eighteen months ago. I took a deep breath and

hoisted my other leg over the branch and pulled myself onto the tree. Once I reached Ziggy, I settled down on an adjacent branch.

“I can help you,” I said.

“And how can you do that, Zhila?”

“We can do our homework together. If you don’t understand something, I’ll help.”

Ziggy’s face brightened. “You’ll do my homework for me?”

“I didn’t say that. Besides, if I do, that will only help you for today. It won’t help you tomorrow.”

“Sure, if you do tomorrow’s homework, too.” Ziggy laughed.

I took a different approach. “Do you want to live a life filled with regret?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you get thrown out of Rouzbeh, where will you go?”

“Toloo.”

“What kind of future do you think that will give you?” I asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t care.” Ziggy jutted out his chin in defiance.

I thought for a second and adjusted myself on the tree limb. Then I reached up and took two apples handing one to Ziggy. After taking a bite, I chewed the delicious fruit and swallowed. I had an idea.

I stared into Ziggy’s brown eyes and said, “Our days are packed with good ones, bad ones, and horrible ones. What kind of day was today for you?”

“Horrible!”

“Getting a bad report from school is a teaching moment. From it you get experience. And if you’re smart, you’ll learn from it. Are you smart, Ziggy?”

Ziggy bobbed his head.

“Believe it or not, there are worse days than today,” I said.

“Like the day you got hit by that car,” Ziggy offered.

“Right! It taught me a valuable lesson, and showed me how resourceful I can be in the face of tragedy.”

Ziggy smiled and his eyes brightened. “How about the best days?”

“I think those are days when all the family gathers for Passover or Norooz,” I said.

Ziggy took a bite of his apple. “I love the Persian New Year celebration. Remember last year during Norooz when cousin Joe ran into the table and knocked over all the food, grass, and flowers Aunt Sabra had arranged so beautifully?”

“Yes,” I said. “Aunt Sabra was very angry.” I tried not to giggle. “Days like that are the best days because they give us memories we’ll never forget.”

“It wasn’t a good day for Joe,” Ziggy said, an aura of seriousness flooded his face.

“No, but he sure learned his lesson. Now if you do well in school the odds of having wonderful memorable days, increases.”

“How’s that?” Ziggy asked.

“With good grades you can get into university and study to become any profession you like. You’ll get a good job, have money to buy a nice home, and be able to afford a family like the one Papa has.”

Ziggy stared at me with an intensity I had never seen before. Was I getting through to him?

I pressed on. "But if you flunk out of Rouzbeh, you'll go to Toloo and who knows. Maybe you'll get arrested by the SAVAK, be thrown in a dungeon, and we'll never see you again. Every day at Toloo will be a bad day and even if you graduate, the opportunities will be limited. Do you want that?"

Ziggy shook his head, threw his apple core at a building across the ally, and descended down the tree.

"Where are you going?" I asked as he passed me.

"To do my homework so I can have good days. Want to help?"

I smiled broadly. "I sure do." I followed him to the safety of the apple tree's knotty roots.

From that day forward Ziggy's grades improved and he eventually graduated from Rouzbeh in the top 10% of his class. He made the Shirazis proud.

Chapter 8

March 1965

I love Nowruz, the Persian New Year celebrated on the first day of spring. In 1965, that was March 20th, a Saturday, a day we usually had school. Now, however, we were off for the thirteen days of the Nowruz holiday.

Papa closed the pharmacy and we packed the car for a picnic, and headed toward Shahr Park, a 64-acre city park in Central Tehran. As usual, Papa parked at the northern gate near the Tehran Peace Museum.

Persians are peaceful people, so the mission of this museum comes at no surprise. The Peace Museum promotes a culture of peace by raising awareness about the consequences of war, including the impact on the health of the people and the environment, as well as the devastation caused by chemical weapons.

Once out of the car, we walked past the front of the museum, gazing up at its beautiful sculpture of a dove perched on a helmet. Fields of green grass dotted by picnic tables surrounded the building. Heads bobbed as the throngs of people rushed to find spots for their picnic baskets.

Ziggy grasped one end of the picnic basket while Papa gripped the other handle and the duo hustled ahead of us to stake claim to a bench. I pushed Zanna in her stroller and Zandra held hands with Maamaan as they stopped to smell the purple tulips glistening in the morning sunlight.

“What do the flowers smell like?” I asked.

Zandra twitched her nose, giggled, and looked back over her shoulder. “They don’t smell like anything.”

Finally, Papa and Ziggy found an empty table near the man-made lake. We were smart to have arrived early. In another few minutes all the picnic benches would be filled.

It was a beautiful day with just a few puffy clouds hovering in a translucent blue sky. Paddleboats formed ripples on the water as they plodded by. Shahr Lake reflected hazelnut and pine trees.

I took a deep breath of fresh spring air happy that the temperature had warmed since the brisk cold of the winter.

Maamaan placed a white tablecloth over the picnic bench while Zandra unpacked the food from the picnic basket. Zanna, now three years old, wanted to help push the stroller rather than be in it. She leaped out and we walked along the path together, stroller before us, keeping our bench in sight. When Maamaan finally signaled lunch was ready, Ziggy kicked his soccer ball into the air and caught it, as if celebrating a victory. He loved picnics.

Since this was a Kuku picnic—the first picnic of the New Year—Maamaan had gone all out. Included with the sandwiches and drinks was a decorative pot filled with sprouted wheat gum called sabzeh. Mother started growing it in February so it would be ready for our picnic. The sabzeh symbolized birth and growth.

Maamaan converted the picnic bench into a haftseen table. On it she had artfully arranged the seven symbolic items traditionally displayed during Nowruz, and all of which begin with the letter “seen” in the Persian alphabet. Flowers in an assortment of colored jars and two lit candles completed the tabletop.

In addition to sabzeh, there was samanū or sweet pudding, which symbolized affluence. Senjed, olives, represented love, and seer, or garlic, connoted health. Seeb, a basket of red apples, portrayed beauty, and sumac fruit placed in back of a candle expressed the color of sunrise. Finally serkeh, vinegar, represented old age and patience.

My family and I sat on a yellow blanket as Maamaan passed out sandwiches. I grabbed a handful of olives and fed them to Zanna after I had taken out the pits.

Ziggy plopped down and tugged at Papa's brown sweater sleeve. "Next week my friend Fayaad is going skiing. May I go with him?"

Maamaan shook her head vigorously, but Papa ignored her. "Your grades have improved a great deal. I'm proud of you, so yes, you may go!" He then exchanged looks with Maamaan, who after a few thoughtful seconds nodded her agreement.

Ziggy jumped up to do his traditional victory dance, which included a few backflips.

While I fed Zanna pieces of a chicken sandwich, Zandra chatted about Ziggy's friend. "Fayaad is so cute," she sighed. "He has long dark hair and a dimpled chin." She turned to Ziggy. "Has Fayaad asked about me?"

"Yeah!" he grinned, "and I told him you're a dork."

Zandra stood over him, arms folded across her chest, as Ziggy doubled over in laughter.

"Sit down little sister," I said. "He's teasing you."

After our meal, Ziggy found one of his friends from school and ran off to play soccer. Zandra decided to go for a walk with Zanna and I offered to help Maamaan clean up the haftseen table.

Midway through the job, Maamaan poked my side. "I don't worry about Zandra. She's pretty and intelligent. She'll find a good man one day."

"Definitely," I said warily, not quite sure where this was going.

"But you, I'm not so sure about."

Here it comes, I thought. Then I said, "Why not?"

"Men are egotistical. They want their women to listen to them; hear what they are saying without having to incessantly repeat themselves."

I bristled and looked at my mother coldly. "So you think I'll never get married because I'm deaf. Is that it?"

Maamaan nodded. "Do you remember last year's Seder?"

I blew out the candles Maamaan lit earlier and placed the candle dish into the wicker basket. "Yeah." I finally acknowledged.

"Did you notice Cousin Talia's son, Sol looking at you?"

"He's a relative, and as Ziggy would say, a dork. Yuck!"

Maamaan took flowers from the jars on the table and stowed n the basket. "He's far enough removed, so it doesn't make a difference."

The park was very noisy because I could hear voices float through the air filled with laughter, but my happy mood was shattered. "You don't think I'm pretty enough, do you, Maamaan?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Not at all. It's your deafness. I'm afraid men will run the other way once they realize."

I folded the tablecloth as I glared at my mother. “A good man will accept me for who I am and if he doesn’t like it, to hell with him.” I threw the folded tablecloth into the picnic table and stomped off.

After passing a few picnic benches packed with people and rounding a copse of trees I took a deep breath of spring air, walked to the edge of the lake, and watched a young couple paddling a boat. The girl held onto her roosari as the wind whipped up around her. Grey clouds began to fill the horizon.

I noticed a piece of shale, a sedimentary rock hidden behind blades of grass and picked it up. This would be a good addition to my rock collection. Then I had an idea. I thought about the beautiful clothing Aunt Sabra always wore. Maybe I could learn to make my own clothes like her. If I look as good as my aunt, boys would flock to me like bees to honeysuckle.

“Yes!” I pumped my arms. Our school dance would be held a few weeks after Nowruz in the boy’s gym of a neighboring school. I’d prove my mother wrong.

I didn’t know then that it would take nearly thirty years to do so.

Chapter 9

April 1965

Aunt Sabra and her family recently moved to District Two, across town on Hafezi Street. Her gray and white two-story home was huge with more space than she and her two children, Joseph and Parry, needed.

When I trudged up the steps to the expansive porch and knocked on the front door, the sun shone directly overhead and my stomach grumbled.

Someone charged the door like a herd of buffalo before I could knock twice. “You made it, cousin. I’m so happy to see you!” Parry gave me a warm hug and kissed both my cheeks.

When I entered her home, I took off my roosari. “You’re just in time for lunch,” Parry said.

Cousin Joe, a tall boy with square shoulders and unruly brown hair, sat in the kitchen nook waiting like a lion cub to be fed his meal.

Aunt Sabra put slices of carrots and squash on a tray and handed it to Parry. On another plate sat neatly sliced portions of French feta cheese. My aunt nodded toward the platter. “Zhila, please set this in front of Joe before he faints.”

She removed aromatic taftoon, Persian whole meal flat bread, from the oven. Once the taftoon and a jug of iced water were placed on the table, we ate.

In between gobbling down feta-covered taftoon, Joe said, “Ziggy going to the party next month?”

“I think so, you?”

Joe nodded.

I looked at Parry questioningly.

“I’ll be there. Maamaan will teach me how to make my own party dress today, right Maamaan?”

Aunt Sabra’s dark brown eyes smiled as she looked at me. “Today, you’ll both learn.”

After lunch, Aunt Sabra stopped her son as he headed out the back door. “Not so fast, mister.”

“What?” he asked sharply.

“Before you go anywhere, please clean up the kitchen.”

“Ah, Maamaan! That’s girl work. Parry can do it.”

Parry spun around on her heels about to spit out a protest. Before she could utter a syllable, her mother said, “She has other chores today. You clean up the kitchen or else you’re grounded for a week. Do we understand each other?”

Joe nodded, went to the kitchen table, and began carrying the dishes to the sink.

Parry led her mother and me up a flight of stairs to the sewing room. It was a small space with one corner table supporting a sewing machine with an ironing board and iron nearby. A cutting table on the north wall was piled with rolls of fabric.

On the wall above the sewing machine hung ten rows filled with colorful spools of thread. Two bulletin boards adorned the other walls with words in Farsi that read, “Create” and “Sew.”

Aunt Sabra put an arm around a curvy seamstress mannequin standing in the middle of the room. “Zhila, here’s where you and Parry will create your dresses for the party.” She turned

to me and pointed to the four rolls of fabric sitting on the cutting board. “That’s for you, but Parry wants the blue roll for her dress, so you can pick one of the others.”

The remaining unclaimed bolts of fabric were black, green and Scottish Tartan—a red, navy, and black fabric. I picked the Scottish Tartan and our lesson began.

Aunt Sabra taught us how to measure and cut the fabric, use the sewing machine, pin the lining, cut elastic for the waist, and a lot of shortcuts to make beautiful dresses.

While she cut fabric, I sat opposite sewing the lining into my dress with black thread. Parry asked me, “Who’s going to the party?”

“Goli said she really wants to go, but first she has to ask her father. Ziggy and Zandra are definitely going.”

“That’s good to hear. Joe said he’ll only go if Ziggy’s there.”

I smiled. “Ziggy said the same thing about Joe.”

Parry excused herself to use the toilet. When she left the room, Aunt Sabra said, “I want to tell you a secret you must promise not to share with anyone, including Parry.”

I looked at my aunt intently. “Of course.”

“As you know, we recently moved into this house after my divorce from your Uncle Izzy.”

I nodded.

“Uncle Izzy is a very rich man.”

Again I nodded.

“Your cousins will always have money, but I’m worried about you.”

I must have looked incredulous, so she added, “I know you’re deaf, Zhila. I also realize how hard it must be for you to understand what people are saying to you. I just want to do something to make your life easier.”

I turned away to wipe a tear from my cheek.

“There’s a deed to this house. After my passing, this home will be yours to do with as you like.”

I ran over and embraced my aunt and then looked up into her saucer-like eyes. “You’re not dying? Are you?” Tears distorted my vision.

She pushed against my shoulders and held me at arm’s length. “No, I’m fine. I’m thinking about when you’re old like me.”

“Really? Thank you, Aunt Sabra. That is an amazing gift.”

“Aunt Rebecca will hold onto the deed until my passing. She’s been instructed to give the deed to you.”

As tears continued rolling down my cheeks, I gave my aunt a warm hug. Then I noticed Parry standing at the door.

“I leave for five minutes and return to a hug fest. What’s up?”

“Nothing! Just hugging the best aunt in the whole world.”

Parry agreed, giving her maamaan a warm embrace, too.

That evening, after hanging my beautiful new dress in my closet, I dreamed about all the boys the party dress would attract at next month’s event. I would be a princess looking for my prince charming. I could hardly wait.

Chapter 10

June 1965

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was the Shah of Iran from September 16, 1941 until his overthrow by the Iranian Revolution 38 years later. During those decades and even after the Revolution, Iran's public schools were segregated. Males went to one campus while females attended another. Only in a few private schools did girls and boys mix.

My sisters and I attended Tabari High School, an all-girl public school in my neighborhood. Our parents splurged for Ziggy and sent him to Hadaf High School, an exclusive all boys' school. Neither campus ever had a school dance.

So how did boys and girls meet? Usually through family gatherings, in parks, restaurants, and movie theaters. Sometimes I'd be bold and walk over to Hadaf with Goli or another friend with the excuse of meeting my brother. On the walk home some of Ziggy's buddies would tag along.

When the party was a week away, I met Ziggy at Hadaf by myself to see which of his friends would be going. Ziggy and cousin Joe stood in front of the school's iron gate with a gorgeous boy that fit Zandra's description of Fayaad, Ziggy's Muslim friend. Besides the long hair and dimpled chin, he had a glowing smile that made my heart flutter.

Like the big sister I was, I motioned to Ziggy to follow me home. He and his friends fell in line, but Fayaad surprised me by walking beside me.

"You're Zhila, right?"

I nodded, and then looked at his full lips, lips I could stare at all day.

"I hear a teacher at Tabari is throwing a party. Can any kid go?"

“Actually, it’s the school principal, Juliet Askari, who’s throwing it. She wants boys and girls to meet so they can become friends over the summer. She has a party at her home every year right after school lets out.”

“Cool! So can anyone go?”

I shook my head. “Not anyone. But boys from Hadaf are always welcome.”

Fayaad smiled and my knees weakened. “Will you be going?”

“Of course,” I said. “How about you?”

“Maybe.”

After walking in silence for a few kilometers I gaped at a gated two-story home with marble pillars. When we rounded the corner we could see a spacious backyard.

I approached a rock wall base that supported an iron fence with spikes at its apex. I grabbed hold of the fence and boosted myself up by digging my toes into a rock for purchase.

“What’s there?” Fayaad asked.

“I can see their backyard. It’s amazing! There’s a playground for young children, a stage and a dance floor.”

Ziggy and Joe rushed over to see what we were doing.

When I jumped down, a sharp pain thundered through my back, a reminder of the car accident I had in ’63. I took a deep breath before facing the boys.

“Do you know who owns that house?” I asked.

The boys shook their heads.

“My principal, Juliet Askari,” I said with pride. “This is where the end-of-school party will be held next week.”

Ziggy, Joe, and Fayaad jumped on the wall and gaped.

I continued walking home when someone bumped my arm; another ripple of pain ran up my back and through my body.

“Sorry,” Fayaad said.

I took a deep breath. “Not your fault. So what do you think?” I looked into Fayaad’s blue eyes.

“I’m definitely going.”

I couldn’t wait to tell Zandra.

On the afternoon of the party I wore the Scottish Tartan party dress Aunt Sabra taught me to make—a perfect outfit for a fancy event. My eyes widened as we approached the Askari mansion, which was more breathtaking inside its high fenced wall. Goli, Joe, Ziggy, Zandra, and I ascended a flight of marble steps leading to a heavy glass door that swerved open with a light push. Joe boldly led the way.

A tall older boy, perhaps college age, greeted us in the foyer. He extended his hand to Joe and introduced himself. Joe pointed to each of us letting the young man know who we were.

Zandra came quickly to my side. “He’s the principal’s son. Name is Jasper.”

Jasper led us through the living room and out a door leading to the huge backyard. I gasped. A swimming pool with lounge area sat to my left. Balloons bounced on strings attached to the wrought iron fence surrounding the pool. To my right, young children played on swings and slides. Way in the back of the yard a group of musicians, calling themselves “The Muslim

Brothers,” were tuning their guitars. A well-manicured lawn surrounded the stage and dance floor with Cypress trees shading key spots.

By the pool, a large table groaned with bowls of fruit, vegetables, and dip. An ice sculpture of a dolphin decorated the middle of the table. People were lined-up with plates and cups in hand to load up on snacks, sandwiches and soft drinks. Since we were hungry, that was our first stop. I filled my plate with a turkey sandwich, potato chips, dip, and green vegetables, poured myself a glass of iced tea, and found an empty table that would accommodate all of us.

Once Zandra and the others joined me, I took a bite of my sandwich, washed it down with iced tea, and said, “This place is amazing!”

Everyone nodded as they gawked at the swimmers splashing in the pool, toddlers screaming in delight in the playground, and teens dancing in the far corner of the yard.

Once we finished eating, Ziggy grabbed a handful of chips and we headed toward the stage. The Muslim Bros were singing a recent Beatles tune, “Help” when we arrived. Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I looked at Fayaad’s full lips. “Will you have this dance with me?”

I nodded and he then took my hand and escorted me toward the dance floor. I noted the crestfallen expression on my sister’s face.

I turned to face Fayaad when we were far away from Zandra. “I’ll dance with you this time, but you’ll have to dance with my sister twice before I’ll dance with you again.”

“Why?”

“She likes you.”

Fayaad looked over my shoulder, smiled, and said, “Deal.”

The band was now playing “The Twist,” Chubby Checker’s 1960 hit. I had been practicing twisting my hips with Goli for the last few days. She said, “Just pretend you’re stamping out a fallen cigarette.” On the crowded dance floor, everyone was doing this American favorite. I was prepared, and ready for the back pain that I hoped was hidden under the façade of my smiling face.

Fayaad knew his moves and we kept the beat nicely trying to avoid bumping into other couples. When the dance was over, Fayaad thanked me, and then made a beeline to the refreshments.

I stood with Goli and Zandra on the perimeter of the dance floor. Goli said, “He’s so cute!”

I nodded and felt my face blush.

Zandra turned to me red-faced, “You are such a traitor.”

“No, you misunderstood. Fayaad only wanted to dance with me so he could talk about you.”

Zandra’s eyes widened, “Really? What did he say?”

Over her shoulder I saw Fayaad approach. “Ask him yourself.”

Fayaad tapped Zandra on the shoulder and the two strolled over to the dance floor as my sister wore a smile that could light up a night sky.

During their second dance, which was a slow one, a husky girl with short brown hair pointed at Zandra and yelled, “Nijis!”

In Farsi, ‘nijis’ means unclean. It’s a racial slur aimed at Jews as if we’ll contaminate anything we touch.

Fayaad's face flushed, pushed Zandra away, and ran off the dance floor leaving my sister in tears.

To his credit, Jasper showed up with a young woman who clasped onto the anti-Semite's fat wrist and escorted her from the premises. As she was led away, the girl screamed, "They aren't Iranian. They are Jews. They are subversives we let live here. Why are they allowed at OUR parties?"

Ziggy, who was close by told me what she said. Then my wonderful brother rescued Zandra from the dance floor and brought her weeping to my side.

Deafness has its pluses. I usually don't hear comments like that, but am told by friends and family about their experiences with prejudice. Ziggy once overheard a few adults talking in my father's pharmacy. "Jews are Israelis disguised as Iranians." His friend agreed and said, "They're Israelis who speak Farsi."

Actually, Jews had been in Persia since before it was Persia. We'd been brought over as slaves by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE after his army destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem. Jews had been in Persia over 1200 years before the Arabs conquered the country and forced the population to convert to Islam.

Even though Jews have been in Persia/Iran over 2.5 millennia, we are still denounced as outsiders. I've seen pictures of Jews on community bulletin boards depicted as devils sitting on piles of money. It hurts! It hurts badly to be told by one of your own people you're not one of them. So it didn't surprise me no one came over to console us. The only non-Jew to walk away from the bandstand with us was Goli. No one came to Zandra's rescue, and Fayaad was nowhere to be found.

We didn't hang around for more insults. Even Principal Askari didn't have the good sense to come talk to us. I'm sure she heard about the incident, but didn't want to offend her Muslim students by playing nice to the nijis.

As we descended the marble steps Zandra grabbed my hand. "That Fayaad sure is a jerk."

I nodded. "He sure is." And we both laughed.

