

## Angel: My First Love\*

“Lovers don’t finally meet somewhere. They’re in each other all along.”

from Rumi, *The Love Poems of Rumi*

### I

#### Meeting Angel

You asked me if I was the only child in my family who went to college. Sure, I will explain my upbringing and introduce my family. We had seven siblings crowded in a modest brick house. We all had elementary, middle, and high school education. The two sisters, the oldest siblings, were in a tenuous situation. My mother did not care about them finishing their high school education. They were marked to be married to our eligible relatives at a young age before completing high school. But we, the five boys, were free to continue our education. We were competing to score well at school and impress our parents to support us in entering graduate education.

There was another exciting competition among the kids of our distant family. In the sizeable clan of our wider family with grandparents, nieces, uncles, aunts, and cousins visiting, coming, going, and sometimes staying with us, there was an intense curiosity about our plans for higher education. There was a trend among the younger generation, the boys, to do well at school. Fortunately, we benefited from my brother-in-law’s pressure on our parents, for he was a vocal proponent of higher education. He would repeat his comment whenever he had an audience with our father. He repeatedly told them, “Look, every family among our relatives is sending a kid or two to Tehran for advanced education.” Our father, an employee of the government

Department of Education, was more receptive to his comments, such as, “Yes, every family wants to have an offspring who may grow up to become a doctor, engineer, or lawyer.”

So, as Adler theorized, competition to succeed at school and bring home high grades influenced me to study hard and get good grades.

But as we, the boys, were growing, entering the age of puberty and sexual development, love became a meaningful entity for us. Girls in the neighborhood and among the extended family became interesting and exciting. I began communicating with a neighbor’s girl, a plump high school student who read and wrote poetry through her brother, who played soccer with us. In those days, in Iran, boys and girls our age couldn’t date privately or communicate face-to-face. Though we lived a few blocks apart, I sometimes would see her on the way to high school when she walked to hers and I to my all-boys school. We would exchange glances and smile at each other. Her younger brother, who played soccer with us, became our messenger, carrying our letters and poems to each other. That friendship ceased when her family moved to another town.

I met another girl, Angel, a distant relative, sometime later through her older brother, a first-year student at a nearby college. The initial acquaintance left a nice impression on me. After seeing her several times in her house and always in the presence of her brother, I began to like her. However, a few years later, when we met again on the Tehran University campus, we began to see each other regularly. Our friendship grew, and soon, I fell in love with her.

My dear, have you ever been in a wondrous love? I am referring to the love that Rumi, the Persian mystic poet, described. He said, “Love is the Water of Life.” The poet believed that even if you had not found a beloved, you could achieve ultimate contentment by longing for

magical love. The longing for love was as crucial for him as falling and being in love. He felt a profound need to be in love, though he probably never achieved his desire.

My dear, let's talk about first love as well. To feel the sanctity of life and attain ultimate happiness, we search forever to discover lasting love. I believe longing for love is ingrained in our genes and is the key to survival. The need to be in love grows in our minds as we depart from childhood and mature, reaching puberty. According to my friend's father, who lent me Darwin's book, love is the key to the success of evolution and the survival of species. Darwin should have claimed that myriads of species in the universe appeared and then disappeared because of the absence or lack of love. Love is mysterious. Rumi often expressed that love is the key to solving creation's riddle.

However, as Einstein had said, *the first love* could be fiery and startling. Of course, at that stage of life, one is at the peak of puberty and brims with hope and excitement; your body is inundated with nascent sex hormones. When the first love captures your heart, it leaves you with an incredible thrill and a sense of powerlessness.

Yes, I have fallen in love several times, but the first love was unforgettable and thrilling. Its ending left a lasting wound, a thorny mark on my being. When I recall that period, my heart pounds; I feel my chest painfully squeezed with a vacuum. A sour mark. In my case, I discovered great love when I was twenty-two years old. I did not choose to fall in love; it occurred unexpectedly. Initially, it was a simple encounter. Then, without my sanction, the seed of first love gently entered my soul and gradually grew. Within a few years, the seed grew and became a plant of incredible passion. She was a junior in high school, the sister of a friend who frequently called on me. I was a year older than her. She became a distant star in my realm who traversed

my vacant universe and came closer and closer to me. After a while, she became a bright and persistent light source in my world. It began like this: I met her at their home when I was eighteen. One evening in the late spring, at the end of my junior year at high school, as I was doing my homework, her brother, two years older than I, came to our house to visit me. He said, "I heard you are good at math and physics." He was a first-year Abadan Institute of Technology (AIT) student. He invited me to join his family for dinner that night. "I would like to talk to you about the AIT in Abadan," he said. "The AIT has adopted a new curriculum similar to Lafayette College of Pennsylvania for two years of pre and four years of master's degree in engineering." Then he pressed the issue and added, "Look, you are in the same situation as I was two years ago. It offers a fantastic opportunity for talented students like you." He brought several pamphlets and left them for me to peruse. "Take this opportunity seriously," he said. Two years earlier, when the brother ended his junior year, he applied, took the entrance examination, scored well, and entered the AIT that autumn.

After dinner at his house with his family, he took me to his room and showed me a copy of an application to the college. "I brought it for you to consider applying to this place," he said. After dinner, as we talked in his room, his younger sister entered and sat beside me. She looked at the application and encouraged me to apply to the college. She surprised me when she said, "Congrats on being called a genius student at your school." I blushed and said, "Well, it was just a usual compliment from the teacher because I scored the highest in the class." When her brother left the room momentarily, she moved closer, smiled at me, and whispered in my ear, "I heard you are an excellent student." On that night, the girl left a lovely impression on me. When I returned home, her words and delightful smile kept appearing in my mind.

I went with her brother to AIT in Abadan and visited the college. The campus, the well-kempt courtyards, and the friendly faculty members impressed me greatly. I was seated next to the president for lunch in the cafeteria. A Ph.D. graduate from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he was friendly. The food was delicious, too. I told the president I would complete and mail the application as soon as I finished my junior year. He said, "Great. Be sure to add a letter of recommendation from the teacher who called you a genius student."

Several weeks later, I revisited my friend and saw his sister doing homework in the next room. She was preoccupied with her assignment, but hearing our conversation, she turned her head, smiled, exchanged a casual greeting, and quickly returned to her homework; I reviewed the application to the AIT. The friend said that letters of recommendation are the second most important determining factor in choosing applicants after grades. A week later, when I went to their house to complete the application, his sister was reading a book in her room. The door between the two rooms was ajar. We again exchanged a greeting. And then, we focused on our work. And she resumed reading the book. She was captivated by the text she was reading. She gently shut the door between the two rooms to focus on the story. My friend said she was reading a novel by Balzac. "Angel particularly reads those books written by French authors translated into Farsi," the brother said. She came by and showed me the book before I left their house. It was a short novel, but I do not remember its title. What was remarkable about those two brief encounters was that they did not produce any deep romantic feelings in me, just a pleasant impression. But her sweet demeanor and friendly smile unknowingly planted a seed of love in my soul.

Four weeks after I took the entrance examination to AIT, I received an acceptance letter from the college. When the brother came to town and visited his family, he invited me to have

dinner with them again. The brother said the college dean was impressed with my application essay and my score on the entrance examination. “On the math section, you scored the second highest among the over two thousand applicants,” the brother said. After dinner, I went to the brother’s room to plan the orientation visit to the college. His sister, Angel, came to the room and complimented me on my test result. She brought her face near me and whispered, “You scored far better than my brother did on his entrance examination.” The fragrance of her hair and the warmth of her face delighted me and left a sweet and lasting impression on me. A day later, I received a congratulatory handwritten note from her, which included, “It’s a great success. I will visit you at the AIT whenever I go to Abadan to see my brother.”

Knowing a college education would guarantee a lucrative job after graduation at the Iranian national oil company, my father was enthusiastic, encouraging me to register for college. “This is a significant chance for you to secure your future,” he repeatedly emphasized. “Don’t count on getting into the Tehran Medical School; remember, many, many thousand applicants compete to get into that school.”

But my brother-in-law, who believed I would do as well in the national examination for a spot in Tehran Medical School, convinced me to forgo the AIT college, finish high school, and aim to enter Tehran Medical School. He looked at me and encouragingly said, “You can do it; I believe you will succeed.”

Eventually, I decided not to go to the AIT, to wait a year until I finished high school, and to try entering Tehran Medical School by taking its highly competitive entrance examination the following summer. As I mentioned, my immediate family wanted to see one boy become a doctor. And I was the chosen one! It was risky because there was no guarantee that I would succeed as

one of the top 300 selected candidates among the several hundred thousand applicants taking the entrance exam. I argued with my parents that my chances of passing the exam and getting into Tehran Medical School would be significantly improved if I spent my senior year of high school in one of the top schools in the capital city of Tehran. After weeks of bickering, I finally won the argument, and my father agreed to send me to my uncle's house in Tehran just before the beginning of the academic year. My decision not to go to AIT disappointed my friend and his sister, Angel, and cooled our friendship. As a result, I did not see Angel until three years later, when I was in my second year at Tehran Medical School.

## II

### My First Love

How on earth are you ever going to explain in terms of chemistry and physics so important  
a biological phenomenon as first love?

Albert Einstein

In the fall of 1960, teeming with optimism and pride, I entered the seven-year Tehran Medical School program. Besides attending and studying the required courses, I read books on philosophy, political ideologies, and Western and Persian literature. The university was a hub for political activities, mainly against Shah's autocratic regime, his disregard for freedom of the press, and his regime's failure to observe the Iranian Constitution. Among the banned political books I obtained on loan from a teacher who was in a pro-communist party was *The Communist Manifesto*, which provoked enthusiastic excitement in me. Before joining political activities, I often read a few passages from the *Manifesto*. I would have goosebumps reading the phrase: "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!" I was not surprised when I discovered this booklet was recognized as one of the world's most influential political documents. However, gaining knowledge about Stalin's brutal regime and the bloody suppression of Eastern European uprisings against their puppet communist regimes by the Russian military convinced me that Marx's ideology was impractical. It all sounded good on paper, but when it came to being tried in Russia after the October Revolution, it produced a brutal dictatorship. So, when I started getting involved in political activity, I could choose from many anti-shah factions, including the underground Communist Tudeh Party; I



joined the Iranian National Front, which sought the implementation of a constitutional monarchy. They demanded the fulfillment of the 1905 Iranian Revolution declaration, a European-style democratic constitutional monarchy with a free press and elections rather than a communist government.

I also played, as much as possible, at the Tehran Medical School Chess Club. But political activities and playing chess came with the price of losing precious time to study my medical courses adequately. However, learning and playing chess with better players paid off, for I became a Tehran Medical School chess team member. The team included several excellent players who had previously won the national intercollegiate championship. When our team achieved the same result again, Shah's minister of education congratulated us at the award ceremony and gave each chess team member a set of five medical school textbooks and a certificate autographed by the Shah.

Then, my personal life took an unexpected turn. At twenty-two, when I started the third year of Tehran Medical School, Angel, the sister of my Ahvazi friend from our hometown, with whom I had had a few brief but pleasant encounters in her house a few years earlier, had applied to enter Tehran University and subsequently passed the entrance examination. She scored well enough to be accepted into the Science College. Our schools were on the same campus, and we occasionally saw each other in the university's main cafeteria. One day during lunchtime, I saw her with two other female students at a table. The memory of those earlier visits to her house flashed through my mind. She warmly responded to my greeting and invited me to join her table. She was now more attractive than when I had first met her at her in Ahvaz. She showed excitement and introduced me to the other two students. It was a brief visit with a few courteous ex-

changes. As I was parting, heading toward the medical school building on the high end of the campus to attend the afternoon lectures, she said, “By the way, my brother is in town. He has graduated from AIT and is about to leave for the United States.” She invited me to join her at a farewell party for her brother at her apartment. She said, “He has asked me about you.” I nodded and said, “Great, I’ll come. Should I bring any food?” She shook her head and said, “My grandmother is living with me. She is cooking. Just come. It would please my brother to see you again.”

A few days later, I attended the farewell dinner for her brother at her apartment. As usual, her brother was cheerful and conversant. During dinner, Angel was sitting across the table from me. She looked different from our last encounter three years before. Her face had light grooming, her hair was arranged beautifully, and her lips were attractively red. She was happy that her brother was leaving for the master’s program in Michigan. The brother spoke of a recent event in his personal life, his girlfriend’s breaking up with him, and woefully said, “I invited my girlfriend to come with me to America. I offered to pay for her flight, too. But she rejected my invitation.” Angel interjected and said, “Oh, forget about her. She must have another suiter on her wing; she’s waiting for you to disappear from the scene.” The brother sighed and said, “I dreamed of taking her along. But she didn’t even accept my invitation to this goodbye party.”

Including her brother, four of us were dining that late afternoon. The homemade dinner included delicious lamb stew, white rice, and Shirazi salad. After dessert, the brother completed packing and returned to the living room. He said, “Soon, it will be time to go to the airport.” Angel looked at me and said, “You could have been in a similar situation as my brother if you had gone to the AIT.” Her brother shook his head and said, “I don’t think so. Listen, sister; my friend

has a much better option.” Looking at me with a cheerful smile, Angel said, “Go ahead, tell me; what is his better option?” The friend said, “Well, after graduation from medical school, he, like one of our relatives, who went to the University of Pittsburg after graduating from Tehran medical school, could take the ECFMG (Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates) examination. If he passes, he can enter a post-graduate medical education in the United States.” Angel was listening with interest. She looked at me and said, “Well, I’m certain you will pass the examination.” She added, “But what could you do after passing the ECFMG?” I was not familiar with the issue, and I said so. The brother said, “Okay, if he scores well on the ECFMG examination, as our second cousin did, he could get accepted at one of the top residency programs in the United States, go to the US, and become a specialist.” Angel turned her face toward me again and said, “Well, knowing you, you will score high on that examination. I’m certain.” She cheerfully added, “If that situation becomes a reality, I will throw a farewell party for you, too.”

That encounter stirred a renewed pleasant feeling in me and rejuvenated my old sentiment toward her. I complimented the table arrangement, the flower bouquet, the food, her hair, and her yellow silk dress. She returned my compliments by praising my success in passing the incredibly competitive Tehran medical school entrance examination. Then she explained why she entered the Science College of Tehran University. She said, “I cannot stand blood. No, I wouldn’t have become a good doctor.” She was humbler and more kindhearted than I had expected. A girl up to that time had never complimented me so caringly. In Iran, girls are very reserved about expressing themselves toward boys and seldom praise them unless they are engaged to be married. I returned her kind words with a few well-deserved praises, too. That afternoon, I saw her as a new person, a lovable girl with delightful charm and an attractive personality.

At the end of the party, I offered to accompany her when she was taking her brother to the airport. She thanked me but said, “We have to leave for the airport and get there several hours before the flight schedule to go through the inspections and departure procedures.” As she was uttering her words softly, I looked at her joyful face and beautiful eyes, the animation of her lips, and the gentle movement of her hands offering to shake mine when I was leaving as they were packing a taxi for the airport.

I left the place and walked to my hermitage, a small room on the second floor where two of my brothers, who also were students at Tehran University, lived. My heart filled with a delightful feeling toward Angel. Her charming smile and complimentary comments hovered in my mind that night. As her name suggested, she, like an angel, had brought a new focus to my life. I felt I had probably been in love with her since I had met her at her house in Ahvaz. Eventually, I fell asleep with her image in my mind. While sleeping, I dreamed of holding her hand and pulling her away from a bearded monster resembling my good cousin who was chasing us, trying to separate me from her. I woke up shaking but felt relieved to realize the nightmare was over.

A week later, on a balmy afternoon, after the last lecture at the medical school, I walked to the Science College and wandered into the main hall, hoping to stumble upon Angel. I looked at the students’ calendar and the first-year schedule of classes and read that her last class that day was ending in twenty minutes. I sat in a chair in the hall and kept reading pages of my school’s assignment for the next day. After a while, I saw her coming out of the classroom. She carried a briefcase, rushed to a nearby small desk behind a window, and began filling out papers. I approached her spot. As soon as she saw my image on the windowpane, she turned around and greeted me. “I guess you came here to see me, yes?” she said, “Well, I took my chance, hoping to

see you somewhere here.” She was cheerful and excited to be at the university, studying at the college of her choice. She asked whether I was interested in touring her college. But I remembered I had to attend a meeting at the medical school chess club very soon. I replied, “I’d love to do it, but I need to attend our chess club’s meeting.” She paused and said, “Okay, maybe later.” I replied, “How about I see you after the chess club meeting? It will be a short gathering.” She nodded and said, “I’ll be here doing my work.”

Later, we met and walked to the gate of Tehran University. It was my first date with her. We walked to a nearby café frequented by students. The place was crowded and noisy. We squeezed around a small standing table in the café’s far corner. She wanted a glass of Coke and a small turkey sandwich. I had enough money to pay for her order and a glass of milk for myself. She observed me searching my pockets and said, “I’ll pay for my order.” And she handed me an Iranian bill equal to ten dollars. After eating the food and drinks, we discussed our situation at Tehran University. She spoke about the upcoming piano concert at the Arts College, and I talked about my interests in chess, the people I met on campus, and the students’ political activities.

I mentioned my fondness for poetry; she said she read fiction, “I like Balzac’s novels,” she said. “But I also like to listen to Iranian lyrical poems.” I saw sincerity and charm in her face. She added, “I knew you were reciting the long poems of Shamlou when you were in high school in Ahvaz.” I nodded and was pleased to know she at least liked to listen to poetry. So, I recited several stanzas of Shamlou’s famous poem, *Parias*, bird-like angels. She asked me to recite the long poem when we visited the next time in a quiet place. On the way to her apartment that night, we walked and talked as if we had nothing else to do. We exchanged ideas about movies that were shown in the Tehran cinemas. She agreed with my opinion on these subjects until I

brought up politics. She kept quiet when I spoke about the recently disputed parliamentary election and explained that the Iranian National Front did not win a single seat, contrary to the exit polls. “They were contesting the results in coordination with the other anti-shah political parties,” I said. “Angel, I believe they completely rigged the results.” She gently shook her head and said, “Let’s stay away from politics. It’s a dangerous situation,” then she added, “My friend, I’m mainly interested in attending to my education.”

I hid my disappointment, for I had become very involved in the student organizations supporting the Iranian Nationalist Front and hoped she would join me in my political activities. Instead, she changed the subject to her family matters. She spoke of her father’s business and his electricity company. She said, “My father’s primary concern is to provide electricity to homes, government offices, and businesses in the city.” She mentioned that she always valued and followed her father’s advice. “As the oldest sibling in my family, my father wants me to succeed at college and be an example for my other six siblings.” I followed her preference and did not mention the students’ planned demonstration on campus, which was scheduled for the next day. But she knew about it. She referred to it later and said, “I read the flyers and the invitation for students to join the protest tomorrow.” She pleaded I stay away from street protests. “The police have already surrounded the campus. Please be careful. Your family is counting on you to keep yourself safe and finish medical school.”

Several days later, we met in the evening and went to another café with a seating area. Fortunately, I had received my father’s monthly check for my expenses, and I kept adequate cash in my pocket to cover our food and soft drinks, but in the end, she insisted on covering her share of the bill. As promised, I brought a handwritten copy of Shamloo’s long poem, “Peria,” and read

the first part. She liked it and said, “It reminds me of the Iranian folk songs.” I then read a stanza of a love poem from Shamlou’s collection, *Aida in the Mirror*: “Who are you that I / so solemnly linger with / in the country / of my dreams?” She smiled and said, “It will be awesome to be in love like this poet.” I nodded, pleased with her reaction to the poem.

Her apartment was two miles away from the university. She told me the family had rented it for her and said, “I have extra bedrooms where my grandmother lives with me in one of them.” We walked shoulder to shoulder to her place. When we approached her apartment, even though it was after midnight and she looked tired, she invited me to enter the apartment and meet her grandmother. After the initial introduction and greeting, her grandmother left for her room shortly after serving us hot tea. We discussed our plans for the coming days and the new friends we had met. I mentioned we were taking the anatomy course after the New Year’s holidays during the next semester. I said, “We will dissect the human cadavers and learn the shape and position of the muscles and internal organs.” She tightened her face and said, “I admire you for going through medical school, but I can’t stand cutting human skin and seeing blood flowing.” I explained how the anatomy lab operates. “O, my dear Angel, the corpses are old samples immersed in formalin for months. They have no running blood in their vessels.” Still, she changed the subject and talked about the recent novel she had read. At the end of our conversation, she said, “Next time we meet, bring a poem of yours and read it to me.” Encouraged and pleased she had asked me to recite my poetry for her, I replied, “Sure, I will also bring a poem by Rumi about longing for love.” She nodded and smiled pleasingly. She said, “I look forward to listening to yours.” I looked into her beautiful eyes and touched her warm arm. She moved closer to my chair and whispered, “Bring one of your love poems, too.” I put my arm around her shoulders

and got closer to her face, but we heard the opening door of her grandmother's bedroom. She turned and looked at her grandmother's bedroom door, which was slightly ajar. She whispered that she was a curious older woman.

An hour after midnight, I left her apartment and walked to my modest place about half a mile away, feeling a deep love for her. That night, I could not sleep for a long while. I tried to study a section of the introduction to the anatomy course, but the thoughts and images of her, the girl I had spent more than half the day with, occupied my mind. Remembering her lovely face, cheerful demeanor, and amicable conversation was thrilling. I recalled the story of Cosette and her father figure, Jean Valjean, and how Jean Valjean rescued Cosette's lover, Marius Pontmercy, from the failed Paris uprising. However, my only disappointment was Angel's lack of interest in political issues. Alas, I remembered her comment quoting her father, "Don't mess with the status quo." Then she added another quotation, "What you get after chaos could be worse than your current system."

It was after two in the morning when I finally fell asleep. During the night, she appeared in a dream, listening to me reciting these lines sung by Alfredo in *La Traviata*: "Love is very breath / of the universe itself / Mysterious and noble, / The torment and delight of my heart." My dream ended when I held her in my arms and was about to kiss her.

Angel came from a wealthy family in my hometown, as we were distant relatives. Her father owned the city utility system, providing electricity to the entire town. He was notorious for exploiting and firing workers if they missed a workday or became ill or pregnant. He was a gambler and a heavy drinker, and he had no affinity for arts and poetry. However, Angel appreciated literature and wanted to listen to my poetry recitations.



On the next call home to my parents in Ahvaz, my mother reacted negatively after I mentioned my friendship with Angel. She bitterly despised her father. “Everybody knows he is a heartless man,” my mother said. “Okay, he is rich and is a successful business owner, but you will eventually be well off, too.” She opposed closer ties between Angel’s family and ours, Angel and me. She ended the call by saying, “Her father is an infidel.”

Despite my mother’s adverse reaction, my friendship with Angel grew. At least once or twice a week, I’d visit her at her apartment and spend several hours with her from late evening until midnight. As was the norm in Iran in those times, our cozy meetings never resulted in an intimate physical interaction. Often, I would touch her arm and get close to her, and she would react by doing the same. Then, I would touch her chin, and she would move closer to me, then I would kiss her cheek and inhale the aroma of her face, aiming to kiss her inviting lips. But she would interrupt my advances and turn her head toward her grandmother’s room with its door now slightly ajar. She would retreat to her chair and discuss her following day’s schedule. She occasionally referred to my political activities and encouraged me to study more instead of attending political meetings and protests.

However, according to our respective families’ traditions, I knew that to advance our relationship, we needed to be engaged and make a date to be married. But I was a poor student and was living on the monthly stipend coming from my father, who, besides his government job, was working in the evening and night in two additional jobs to earn enough money to provide financial support for the family and my two brothers and my university education’s expenses.

Often, I was determined to declare my deep love for her and reveal my intention to be with her for the rest of my life. Still, the futility of my position within my non-supportive family,

especially my mother's hostile view of her father and my lack of financial independence, would prevent me from speaking up and revealing my love for her. Sometimes, the feeling of being humiliated as a child would surface in my mind at a sensitive time when I was with her, enjoying the tender moments of being next to her, feeling the warmth and scent of her body. I would contemplate whether I was worthy of her love, having a sullied past when being humiliated by my cousin when I was a child. So, at those conflicting moments, I would refrain from telling her how much I had fallen in love with her. I would feel undeserving of her love, even though I thought she cared for me because she had told me so.

Frequently, she would say she loved my poems. Once, after reciting the poem "I Love the Street You Live In," she brought her face to my ear, said, "This is my favorite," and kissed my ear. We were both emotional and pushed our chairs near each other. I looked at her eyes; they were glowing with excitement. I put my hand around her, gently squeezed her into my arms, and kissed her face. Our lips were almost touching when we heard her grandmother opening her bedroom door and going to the kitchen behind where we were sitting. After a pause, she regrouped, and after the grandmother was gone, she asked me, "Is this poem about me?" I replied, "Of course." She smiled and squeezed my arm.

One winter night, it was after midnight when I left her apartment. I walked to my place in the deserted streets and felt fortunate to be in love with her. I was ecstatic because I was sure she loved me, too. I still felt the softness of her lips on my face. I mumbled to myself; I would open my heart at our next meeting and tell her I deeply loved her. Then I thought, she deserves pure love, a man worthy of her beautiful being. I entered my dark room, perplexed. But my deep love for her overcame my bewilderment, and I revisited her in a few days.

A few weeks later, during the Persian New Year's holiday, when she and I had returned to our town and our respective families, I mentioned my deep passion for Angel to my older sister, who lived in an oil production town a hundred miles away. She reminded me that because they are our distant relatives and adhere to similar traditions, to be engaged to Angel and set up a date for the wedding as the custom required, our parents should approach them, support my desire, and propose our marriage. She contacted Angel's mother and revealed my love for her daughter. To allow me to talk to Angel's parents, she invited Angel's family to travel to her town and be her guest for the New Year's celebration. As they promptly accepted the invitation and drove to my sister's home, I joined them a day later. During the New Year's dinner celebration in the city's petroleum club, I talked to Angel's mother and expressed my love for her daughter. She replied that she and her family knew about our intimate friendship and my love for their daughter and said, "Your mother should come forth and request the union of you two."

So, when we all left my older sister's town and returned to Ahvaz, the New Year's holiday provided the opportunity for an encounter between our two families. However, at the arranged meeting by my older sister between Angel and her mother and my mother and me in our guest room a few days after New Year, my mother, who was expected to speak of my desire to be engaged to and marry Angel, refused to express my sentiment. Instead, she bloviated about religious issues and individuals' duties to be good Muslims. Eventually, she acknowledged the purpose of the meeting. She stunned Angel, her mother, and me by stating that I was still a pre-med student and had a long way to go to graduate and become a doctor, and I was in no position to marry anybody and start a family.

I was devastated by my mother's unexpected and hostile comments. Angel and her mother were deeply disappointed. Appalled, I excused myself, and as I left the room, I shook my head and looked at Angel's face, seeing tears welling in her eyes. I went to a dark room in the corner of my parents' house, stunned, not understanding my mother's belligerent behavior. After a while, I left the house, wandered for hours in the streets, and left for the palm date farms south of the city along the Karoon River. I sat on the river's rocky shore, staring at the dark waters flowing toward their destination in the Persian Gulf. As I contemplated the event in my parent's house, I looked at the rocky edge of the river. I thought of Virginia Woolf's tragic suicide when she drowned herself in the river Ouse by filling her pockets with rocks and walking into the deep river. But I recalled she had depression and attempted suicide a few times. Then my thoughts shifted to heartbroken Werther, who wasted himself after losing his beloved. At that moment, I saw the fishermen in their canoes paddling along the river's flow, pulling the long fishing nets toward the shore near where I was.

One landed his boat nearby, saw me, looked at my glum face, shook his hand, climbed closer, and said, "What is the matter with you?" I kept quiet. He went to the boat, picked up a fish from the loaded net, which was still moving its gills, gasping for air, brought it to me, and said, "Take this home. Enjoy it." He pointed to the river and added, "Look at the sun setting over there. Don't you like its reflection on the river?"

So, I looked at the river's surface and saw the floating bands of red clouds sliding over the short waves. The fishermen left the shore, carrying baskets loaded with fish on their backs, and headed to a truck nearby. I sat there for a while longer. The sun disappeared behind the palm date trees on the west side of the river. Now calm, the twilight glow barely lit the gloomy river as

I kept my head between my propped hands and wondered what to do with my life. When it became dark, confused, and defeated, I moved away from the river, leaving the dead fish on the rocks. I reluctantly returned to my parent's house. The living room was crowded with my family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, having a New Year's holiday dinner. They were noisy. I was sure nobody had noticed my absence. I slithered to a dark room in the house's corner until morning. No one came by to see what I was doing.

After the disastrous meeting between Angel and her mother, my mother, and me, everything changed adversely for me. I knew our relationship would end tragically under her family's pressure, especially her father, who felt my mom had insulted him. After the Persian New Year's holidays, I returned to Tehran. A few days later, I dared to visit Angel and found her to be as cold as ice. There was no familiar charm and pleasant excitement on her face. I realized our affair had ended dreadfully. During the brief visit, which was our last, I could not find any solution to save our dying bond. Neither of us talked about the holiday visit to our hometown. After an agonizingly long pause where I did not devise any practical way to mitigate the disastrous situation, she said she must focus on her studies. She looked into my eyes and uttered words from my mother's rant at that woeful meeting in Ahvaz in our house. She said, "Your mother wants you to focus on your medical education and become a doctor. I, too, have no intention of marrying anyone."

I felt like Goethe's Werther, who had lost his sense of purpose. My troubled heart was aching. My mind was confused and heavy with sorrow. I left her apartment heartbroken. Then, adding insult to my wounded heart, my older sister called me two weeks later to inform me that Angel had flown back to Ahvaz recently. Under her father's advice, her family hastily arranged a quick marriage to one of her suitors at a small private wedding in Ahvaz. She said, "Angel's fa-

ther was furious about our mother's tirade and refusal to support your desire. Our mom insulted Angel's father's character at your foursome meeting in Ahvaz, preaching religion's nonsense to them." As I was speechless, my sister added, "Our mother burned all the bridges between our two families." She paused and moaned, "I feel sorry for your loss. She is a lovely girl."

The news was another harsh blow to my injured heart. I was clueless about what to do and where to go. I squatted in the dark corner of my room. I covered my face and wiped my eyes. I was angry at my mom and now hated to return to medical school classes. I was desperate. I thought of the Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat, who, in desperation and melancholy, committed suicide by inhaling gas and killing himself in Paris. I looked up at the stack of books on the shelves, pulled out his masterpiece, *Blind Owl*, looked at the first page, and whispered, "In life, there are certain sores which, like a kind of canker, slowly erode the soul in solitude." I thought the cause of my torment was my mom's fanatic faith, her blind, obsessive commitment to the radical aspect of Shia Islam. Her lack of respect for me, Angel, and our love. I got up and left the room, but instead of going to medical school, I wandered on the crowded sidewalks of Tehran. I realized losing my dream girl would destroy my happiness forever.

It was sad to learn later that Angel's engineer husband was a womanizer and gambler. Several years later, I heard Angel's marriage to the suitor did not last long, and she divorced him when she discovered his betrayal. A year later, Angel married a colleague at the university in Tehran where she was teaching. Sadly, some ten years later, when I was completing my training at a gynecology oncology fellowship at UT Health Science Center in San Antonio (UTHSCSA), I learned that Angel, my precious *first love*, had developed invasive breast cancer, which was diagnosed at an advanced stage, and died shortly after the discovery of cancer when she was only

42. However, her first husband, soon after the divorce, became wealthy when, after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, he teamed up with a shady international oil trading cartel and evaded the US sanctions. Soon, the mullahs turned against him, aiming to access his various bank accounts; he fled Iran and settled in Paris, gambling in Monte Carlo and dating Parisian models.

Eventually, my mother recognized how she had ruined my tranquility and deprived me of happiness. The following year, when I was visiting home from the university during the New Year's holiday break, one early morning, she walked to the guest room where I was sleeping, pulled the sheet from my face, gently patted my hair, and kissed my lips, whispering words saying she shared my pain I suffered losing my *first love*. She muttered, "I'm sorry, my son, but you couldn't afford her and satisfy her luxurious lifestyle. She comes from a rich family, and we can hardly provide enough funds for you to finish your medical school education."

In disbelief, I unhurriedly turned my head and opened my eyes a moment later, but she was already gone. I wondered how she could feel my pain, the heartbreaking end of my romantic relationship with the girl. That kiss and her remorseful three words, "I am sorry," still resonate. It was one of a few sweet memories I cherish from interacting with my mother. In some subtle way, she apologized for ruining my affair with the girl I deeply loved at that stage of my life. My First

Love.

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