

DEAR JAR OF MARSHMALLOW FLUFF

Christina Maile

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Dear Jar of Marshmallow Fluff

I know we have not talked in a while. But you were never much of a talker especially considering it was me who did your voice whenever we did talk. Of course the downside is whatever you said to me it was still really only me talking. Or maybe that was the upside.

I think, your sugar content has really affected my brain. Let me start over.

I brought you to stand on this table in front of me because I needed you as a physical representation of all the other jars of Marshmallow Fluff I have known.

I suspect you know already what I am going to say. I sigh, O dear jar of Marshmallow Fluff,, it's not me, it's you. There I've said it.

I see you frantically trying to roll off the table. Stop I say sternly Listen to me, Fluff.

We have been together a long time . Even though at this moment you are unopened, I can still see in my mind's eye your snowy peaks and landscape of perfectly motionless, infinite and solitary clouds. No wait.... I need you to stay unopened, because that is the only way I can open up to you.

Well, yes technically, , I have been open to you before. But that is because we were both uncapped at the same time. Right now, though, I am asking you to keep your red cap on, and let me speak.

To put it as clearly as possible, have you ever read a book called Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy?

I take your silence as a no.

What I discovered from that book is that there are really 6 senses - not 5.

They are Scent, Sight, Sound, Taste, Touch. Those were fun times, am I right, Fluff? But according to this book, there is a 6th sense - Sugar - which the author describes as the sense of attraction.

Please don't cry. it is true I once felt an absolute physical attraction to you, and to all the things you are: Sugar, of course, but also to be fair High Fructose Corn Syrup, , Water, Egg whites, Cream of Tartar. Xanthan Gum, and your own Artificial Color – which you once told me was blue.

Blue. , you will be blue whether I stay or go. . Don't you see, your chemistry is your destiny.

I remember the first time.... I wandering around a strange supermarket looking for something , anything until some 6th sense vibrating through the air caused me to wander down a nameless aisle , to glance at a lonely dusty bottom shelf , to see a round barrel of a jar with a jaunty red cap. Fireworks. You came home with me that

night. As did every other jar day after day, year after year – your little clouds of goodness filling me with ecstasy.

But what is the 6th sense really, - one side heaven, the other side withdrawal., We are just bundles of appetites. We devour each other, and then we go on to something new. Yes I know what you are going to say, and I repeat, This has nothing to do with Peeps.

We just no longer have an appetite for each other. Deep down I know you hate me. Oh please, Peeps again. They're just somebody from work. I can't have friends from work?

I am such a coward. Wouldn't it be easier for both of us if you could read my mind.

Then for the next hour, we could talk about pleasant things while our minds grappled with lies and excuses. It would be like texting, but without a phone.

What to do? What to say? No, please don't say anything, Fluff. Did you say something? It doesn't matter what you say, Shall I walk away first or do you want to be first. Sorry I forgot, I'll walk away first. Wait, why is it always me who does the walking, the carrying, Why can't you at least pretend to walk away first. My god, Fluff stop being so unreasonable. Alright, alright, let's both walk away at the same time.

Goodbye Fluff.

Wait, don't.

FIN

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE

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He was my best friend's boyfriend. I was married. In his pocket, he always carried a baggie of the best grass I would ever have.

For almost 2 months, we spent practically every other afternoon together from 1 O'clock to 4 o'clock.....til my kids came home from school.

I rolled the joints, starting with fat ones to get the buzz going, then thinner as the bag emptied. He made us tea in my kitchen, and gathered whatever cookies I had lying around,

At the time, my apartment was in its Japanese phase. Visitors had to remove their shoes, step up onto the 18 inch high platform which took up the entire living room, then find a way to sit down on the carpet. I sometimes felt a little badly about this.

But Kevin having studied philosophy easily kicked off his loafers, mounted the platform, and elegantly folded himself into an actual lotus position I never grew tired of watching him. .

What followed was how we transported ourselves to the edges of the universe and beyond. Fueled by dope, we discussed Heisenberg's Theory of Uncertainty; Schrodinger's Cat and the Principle of Infinite Outcomes. We talked about the origin of conscious and the breakdown of the bicameral mind; Godel, and Escher, and Bach. We asked ourselves - If the mind is not a physical entity, does that make our heads lighter when we think.

Did dinosaurs exist in the Middle Ages? If a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it, does that mean that we are no longer familiar with the way a tree sounds when it falls. .

We invented new categories of things. For example, an archaeology of the future that would tell us now, the most important things to save for the future . We played card games without cards. Play hangman using only the million names of God.

We talked until the tea grew cold, and the cookies sweeter, until the afternoon light drifted across the windows. ...until the doorbell sounded and the voices of my kids rang on the other side.

I'd run downstairs to let them in. He'd clean up the joints, open the window, and while I busied the kids in their rooms, , he would quietly go down the stairs and let himself out.

But that afternoon, the afternoon of which I am now speaking, everything was not the same as before: In a few days, Kevin was leaving the country.

He had broken up with my best friend. He was going to India to study Hindi and the sitar.

In those days, it was one of the perfectly logical things to do.

“You’ll fit right in,” I told him, “your hair is just long enough.”

“You should give me a haircut, “ he replied.

It must have been the joint talking because Kevin was a very meticulous person. Always the khaki pants with a crease, the shirt with a collar, the matching socks. I on the other hand - thanks to 12 years of Catholic school uniforms - never caught on to what went with what. Plus I had never cut the hair of a grown up.

But since it was Mexican gold that was doing the talking, I hunted up the scissors, an shirt of my husband’s which I draped over Kevin’s shoulders, and a comb which I ran through his hair,

It wasn’t really that long. And so perfectly aligned, like the feathers of a bird.

“Ready?”, he whispered.

For the next two and half hours, one tiny feather after another, I microscopically cut each and every single hair on Kevin's head.

We hardly talked.

Instead we noticed things.

I noticed no matter how gently I touched him, he sighed . How he knew to automatically move his head in the direction that the scissors moved.

He noticed that my tee shirt was inside out.

I noticed that when he brought the joint up for me, his fingers brushed my lips.

When I raised my arms, he noticed the tattoo on my lower back.

I noticed his after shave smelled like cinnamon and bay rum.

What we did not notice was the time. Until the doorbell rang and the voices of my kids on the other side of the door.

I put down the scissors and comb and ran downstairs to let the kids in. But I did not follow them into their rooms. Instead I remained at the bottom of the staircase waiting for Kevin to come down the steps.

A few months later, he would be dead, his bus crashing into a truck on the highway to Rajasthan.

But that afternoon, the afternoon of the haircut, I was waiting for Kevin, watching him coming down the steps, nodding and smiling at him, and he nodding and smiling at me as if our goodbye was just a minor disturbance of our certainty, our never-ending entwined life, as my kids rumbled around us, still watching, as Kevin closed the door behind him, and the kids cycloned ahead of me up the stairs.

What no one noticed as I followed them into the kitchen was the archaeology of the future - the white long-sleeve shirt folded neatly on the back of the chair, the scissors and the comb lying on the table, the ginger hair - like tiny feathers - in a half circle on the floor. Or the two tiny cups of tea sitting side by side on the oblong tray.

FIN

SON OF KERMAN

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Behruz replaces his cellphone and returns to the kitchen. So much left to do. He tumbles the apples, plums and grapes into his new fruit bowls. The dishes, the cutlery.... should he wash them again. Is it too early to take the pastries out of the refrigerator?

The voice on the phone... Uncle Abbas, sounding so much like his father.

Behruz forces himself to stop thinking and light the stove under the samovar. After the tea is served, yes, with everyone settled, with his long-absent uncle, Abbas, at his side, then he willUncle Abbas. It is so unbelievable. To come back. And to come back at this particular time....when the news from his father is so.... No no. he must not get himself excited. He will think instead of that long ago No Ruz. Of the last time he ever saw Uncle Abbas. The lukewarm water is like a river running backwards in time, as washes the cutlery.

No Ruz , the new year, when all the kids are given coins from relatives in celebration. But Uncle Abbas had done something completely different.

This short plump man whom he calls Uncle, but is some kind of older cousin, had squatted down with much groaning and handed him a heavy box. “When I saw this in the window, I said to myself, Abbas, you are going away and most certainly in America they do not have such a clever thing for a clever nephew who likes to build things. ”

Behruz opened the present. It, was as if Uncle Abbas, had known his secret wish even before he Behruz himself knew.

“Where are you going my child?”, his mother worried, her hands holding a tray of tea glasses as Behruz zipped past her. “We have guests.”

For the first time in his life, Behruz doesn’t respond to his mother. His only thought is to get away. If his mother, or his father who is now always angry with everyone, saw his uncle’s present, they would immediately say he was too young or as his father would add as he has recently done so many times, all the time, too stupid, too clumsy for this rare and wonderful thing now residing in his arms. His parents would grab it. His mother would wrap it in cloth and put it away in the bedroom closet – the exact fate of a backgammon set, or his father would sell it to someone.

Behruz runs up the stairs to the roof, crossing over to his spot where the shade of the wind chimney is his own personal shade. He kneels and places the box down upon the soft and frayed carpet of his afternoon naps,

Carefully removing all, laying each one down in front of him, they gaze back at him in their solitary elegance and soldierly perfection, - the hammer, the wrench, the pair of pliers, the two screw drivers, the measuring tape, the metal angle, the two kinds of saws, the bar of metal with its floating bubble..

And as if the world's joy was his alone, the box itself was full of secret places meant only for him - place for sandpaper, a place for instructions. One showing how to replace the tools neatly into the box, the other, how to build a tray with a straps for selling sweets on the street. Then there are the compartments already filled with nails and screws and one - what could they be for? - brimmed up with wooden red pegs.

Even now in his well-ordered living room, Behruz still marvels at the wonder of that long-ago toolbox. How happiness could still proceed from that long ago toolbox. How he could not bear to leave its presence even as his parents called and called for him to say goodbye to Uncle Abbas.

And now this very same Uncle whose gift had led Behruz to eventually find the profession he now holds, is coming to this very apartment. Would he ask to see the toolbox again. His heart trembles. Gone. Gone forever. When his father suddenly abandoned the family that summer, his mother sold everything. Rampaged through the house. Sold it all. It's gone, she said to his tears. Stop being a child, Behruz.

Now Behruz is standing next to his apartment door, He suddenly had an idea. He the foolish and curious man that he is, has only a few minutes before their arrival. He will practice seeing his apartment through the eyes of his uncle. Only someone who has lived a long time in the USA is able to appreciate how modern Behruz has made it. Behruz's father has never seen apartment. He has never returned to Iran. His business in California keeps him very busy, his American children wanting so many things. Perhaps Uncle Abbas when he returns to America might mention to his father how nice the apartment is.

Tell him of Behruz's chrome and black couch and matching armchair. He moves it a few millimeters. There. Perfect. Maybe mention the low metal and glass cabinet and the very expensive LG large screen TV from which Behruz removes the dust cover. He also re-adjust the stunning white porcelain sculptures of French shepherdesses standing on either side it.

Behruz's mother has herself crocheted the filigree on the silk dust protectors covering his stereo cd player and amplifier. He would have liked something more stylish. Definitely . But it would have upset her.

The rug is very good. It is from this town, Kerman, and it is very well made, very pale and beautiful. But his uncle is probably very modern now, he will not want to sit on the floor. Will there be enough seating for everyone? Oh why didn't he think of this before. In the corner, there is a small dining area with two very modern chairs and a

chrome glass table – not at all like the heavy gilded dining things everyone seems to love. There is a chair in the bedroom - an old fashioned one his mother had given him. It does not match anything in the living room. He makes a decision. The children will sit on the rug.

He sets the cut glass bowls filled with fruit are on two small tables in front of the couch. He unboxes the new tea glasses from Isfahan. There are very good pastries in the refrigerator. Not the most expensive ones, still they are from the best bakery in the city. And cantaloupe juice for the children - enough for the adults as well, if they wish. He has also at some small risk purchased some wine from an Armenian family in case Uncle Abbas wants wine, which they commonly do in the United States.

And then there is his father's promise. Since their phone call, he has shared it with no one. Not his mother who would be upset. Not his friends who might by their talk cause trouble at work. NO the only one he would have told, he realises with astonishment, would have been Uncle Abbas. The timing of this visit can only be one more example of his father's distant power to make him happy.

He checks the collars of his brand new Calvin Kline shirt. In the mirror he practices his smile. He searches his face for his father's. He is balding. He has his mother's downcast eyes. His lips are They are thin ...not at all like his mother's. The downstairs buzzer rings. Will Uncle Abbas recognise him?

The clatter of feet on the marble stairs. The chattering just outside the door. The doorbell. Behruz takes a last look at the apartment. He unlocks the top lock. He opens the door.

“Welcome, welcome” he shouts. Why is he shouting. Calm down he says to himself. His eyes search for Uncle. He recognizes everyone else. The old father of Uncle Abbas, and the other older cousin, Uncle Hussain. There is Hussain’s wife Farideh, their three heavy children whose names he’s forgotten. This is the brother’s family who Uncle Abbas is staying with in Tehran. But that man and woman in the back. That man. Could that be his Uncle Abbas, his hair so grey, his face so stern and lined. He is not as heavy as Behruz remembers, but he is short. Suddenly the man smiles and Behruz heart leaps.

“Behruz, my young cousin”, the man calls out, “so good to see you. I told them the only reason to travel south in this heat was to see you.” Come here, my boy.”

Before he can answer, Behruz has to step back to let the crowd in.

“Wait, wait”, he cries to them. “No need to take off your shoes. This is a modern house.”

But everyone ignores him, including Uncle Abbas who is helping the strange woman, his wife?of course his wife, find a place for her shoes. The children step out of

theirs quickly, and cluster around the couch. They are followed by the grandfather, who Behruz guides to the armchair

“We finally made it”, his uncle Hussein laughs.

Farideh, the uncle’s wife bustles and gives him a kiss on both cheeks. “You are so thin.”

When Uncle Abbas and the American wife finally enter, the hubbub of the family milling around the grandfather in the armchair, the children wandering around, the search for seating, has destroyed the picture of the clean modern apartment that Behruz had created for Uncle’s entrance.

Uncle Abbas hugs him, kisses both his cheeks and says

“Behruz, dear . Look at you. You are even taller than me.”He turns towards the woman.

“Here, let me introduce you to my“. But Uncle Abbas is interrupted by his brother’s loud voice.

“Sit sit” Uncle Hussain tells his wandering children, “be careful, there are lots of beautiful things around.

Behruz remembers he is the host.

“ Yes, sit everyone, anywhere. Perhaps the children can sit on the”

But three kids and the parents immediately squeeze themselves onto the couch, the kids actually perching on its arms. Uncle Abbas and wife take the seats at the dining table. The grandfather smiles vacantly from the armchair. Behruz has no choice but to quickly run into his bedroom and pulls out his mother’s chair for himself

“Such a beautiful apartment”, Uncle Hussain exclaims. “I think this is the first time we are here. Isn’t that right?”

“Thank you thank you. I am now only just settling in”, replies Behruz. He turns to his, “Uncle, it is so long since I have seen you....”

“Almost 19 years.... you were just a boy. Please, I want you to meet my wife. Her name is Victoria”.

“*Hi,*” she says. “*How are you?*”

Behruz smiles at her. “Welcome to my house”.

Abbas turns to his wife and says in English. *He welcomes you to his house*”

“She is learning, Farsi” Uncle Abbas says to Behruz. The wife nods and mispronounces Baile, the word for yes.

Behruz notes that Uncle’s wife is not blonde or pretty. She doesn’t even look American. She is wearing a very odd manteau. It is dark brown with small white squares. She doesn’t look modern at all. More like a villager. Uncle ‘s tastes must have changed very much in America. Behruz is suddenly angry with himself. To be judging Uncle’s wife She must have other virtues else why would Uncle have married her. Perhaps she has a very good business.

Uncle Hussein hands Behruz a box of pastry. Behruz is in a dilemma, should he serve his as well as theirs? Or should he serve just theirs?

One of the children picks at the grapes.

“Please, let me get the dishes.” Running to and back from the kitchen, Behruz brings out a tray of his new fruit plates and cutlery. Everyone jostles to find room for their plates on the small tables. Behruz picks up one of the fruit bowls and walks around the room, offering it first to Uncle’s wife. She chooses a plum and a grape.

“Please more”, he urges.

Behruz asks if you would not take a little more fruit, says Uncle Abbas to his wife. She smiles and shakes her head.

You must take more , it is not polite to take so little, he whispers . She takes 4 more grapes.

Behruz stops at each family member and offers fruit. He is impatient to talk to Uncle. Everyone marvels at how nice the fruit looks.

“So Behruz Your mother tells us you have a very important job” Uncle Hussain smiles.

Before Behruz can answer, Uncle Hussain turns to his brother and says “Did Behruz tell you he is now an inspector for the municipality? His mother told me. Nothing can be built without him, she says. Isn’t that so, Behruz? ”, he laughs.

Behruz is unsure how to respond. Should he be modest about his accomplishment which is expected or, should he exaggerate a little to impress Uncle Abbas,

“Oh there are plenty of us inspectors,” he answers, “ I am just one of many...but there are many rules, and we...that is I have to investigate all engineering and architectural issues so that.... “

One of the kids frantically whispers to his mother.

“He must use the bathroom” she announces as she readjusts her scarf. The child is mortified and hides behind his mother’s manteau. “Such a long trip. Men. all they want to do is drive, drive, drive.”

He has to pick up more fruit from the kitchen anyway so Farideh and the child follow Behruz out of the living room past the kitchen to the door he indicates, off to the side..

When he returns with a tray of thin watermelon slices, his two uncles are deep in discussion about the VW bus they have refurbished for their road trip.

“Never let this man buy a used car by himself,” Uncle Hussain jokes, pointing to Uncle Abbas, “Such troubles we have with it.”

“It is a good van,” laughs Uncle Abbas, “it just needs someone who knows how to drive”, pointing at Hussain.

Behruz’s grandfather has fallen into a doze in the armchair. Behruz takes the plate with the uneaten fruit off his lap and places it on his TV shelf, thereby ruining still another effect of sophistication, but he does not want to take the plate into the kitchen and leave the living room again, leave the presence of Uncle Abbas.

“It needs oil everytime we stop for gas. Is there a good garage here in Kerman?”, Uncle Hussain asks as Behruz retakes his seat.

“Oh, yes yes” he answers, “I know of two, but Mohammad’s garage on the Street of Martyrs which is not far from here is very good. He is probably closed now, but he may re-open later in the evening, but most definitely in the early morning.”

Oh no, a thought has just occurred to Behruz. “Have you a place to stay?” Behruz tries to calculate if there is enough room for everyone to sleep in his living room. He did not even think about this.

“ Oh don’t worry, Behruz, our family travels in style”, Uncle Hussain replies, “ We have already booked a palace for our tired bones.”

Uncle Abbas smiles.

“We are staying at the elementary school, “ Uncle Hussain, continues. “ They rent out the classrooms to teachers and their families during summer vacation. And so we can all travel very cheaply.. It is wonderful. The school administrators remove all the desks, and put down rugs for sleeping. They give you blankets, and assign everyone who wants to spend the night a classroom which comes complete with a TV set and a refrigerator . Plus you can warm up food, and make tea in the kitchen. I am a teacher, so we travel in style.”

Uncle Abbas adds, “ Victorica loves it, don’t you, Victoria ” He turns to her *I am telling Behruz about the place we are staying tonight..* She nods and smiles.

“I have heard they are clean and comfortable”, Behruz replies politely. Since he is not a teacher, he cannot book rooms at the schools. His job rarely allows him time to travel anywhere, and when he does, it is always to Tehran, to his mother’s house.

Before they can begin talking about another irrelevant topic, Behruz quickly turns to his Uncle.

“Are you happy to be back in Iran? Things have changed a lot since you left.”

Abbas nods. “Iran is as beautiful as I remembered. And with home cooked Persian food, I have gained 10 lbs in just 15 days,” he laughs. “We have been to so many places, Victoria is very impressed. He turns to her” *We have visited many beautiful places, right, Victoria?* The poor uncomprehending woman nods, smiles once again, and resumes her concentrated efforts to cutting a plum without it rolling off her plate.

“Where have you visited?”, Behruz asks.

“Oh everywhere! As I told these guys,” nodding to his brother and his father, “a vacation for all! We have visited Hafiz, and Isfahan, etc After this we will turn back to Tehran. Then we will go north, to the Caspian Sea.”

“Driving, driving”, intones Hussain in a rumbling voice, “and more driving.”

But Behruz will not relinquish his conversation with Uncle. “Does your wife like Iran?”

Uncle turns to his wife. “*Behruz asks if you like Iran.*” She nods and once again inexpressibly replies *Baile yes* and smiles. *Tell him what your favorite city is?* She is quiet for a moment as if reviewing some deep concept, but is really just hoping not to mispronounce it. *Isfahan*, she answers.

“Her favorite city is Isfahan”, Uncle repeats in Farsi. Everyone laughs and claps their hands and congratulates the American wife as if she has just performed a complicated acrobatic trick.

During this exchange, Farideh returns to the living room with the child.

To Behruz’s shock, the child now incredibly sits on the couch, while the mother perches on the couch’s arms.

Seeing the look on Behruz’s face and interpreting it to mean something else, Farideh asks him, “May I help you with anything?”

Behruz stands quickly and exclaims. “The tea. I have fresh tea . Please wait.” He rushes to the kitchen and begins pouring out the tea into the narrow Isfahan glasses. Farideh soon joins him, carrying the plates with the remains of the eaten fruit.

“Shall I wash these?”

“No no, please you are my guest. Please go back to the living room.

When he returns to the living room with the tray of tea, Uncle Abbas is gazing at the picture on the wall.

It is one of Behruz’s best buys. A gilded gold frame surrounds a painting of soft dreamlike trees and misty castle far away. In the front, a man in white wig and an elegant brocaded French coat stands, holding the bridle of his horse in one hand, and his tri-cornered hat in the other while a princess leans back on her golden-rope swing.

“Do you like my picture, Uncle?”Behruz calls out.

But he gets no further. He must bend to offer tea and sugar to the grandfather who is still dozing and doesn’t respond , and then to the American who accepts with a weird exclamation of delight. Then to the others on the couch. Then back to the kitchen to get the pastries.. He piles the tray high with his and their pastries. So far no one has noticed

how beautiful his trays are.. He tries to arrange the pastries to allow some of the tray's design to show.

Farideh returns to the kitchen, and asks if he has a second tray for the pastries.

“Oh of course I have .” He realizes he sounds irritable and she is really trying to be of help.

“It is so complicated to have company over.” Behruz shakes his head

“Oh you are doing very well. But its is hard for men to do this. We must find you a wife,” she laughs.

When they return to the living room, it is she who strides ahead first to distribute the additional plates. In her wake Behruz follows with the tray of pastries.

By the time Behruz returns with second tray, and retakes his seat with his own tea and pastry, the children have already finished theirs and are gazing longingly at the pastry tray.. How could they have eaten so fast. Unbelievable. Uncle's wife, has also finished her pastry.

They are very delicious, she says to him. Uncle Abbas translates. “She likes ‘em,” he says, smiling indulgently as he himself takes another. “Where did you get them, I like these one especially, is it a speciality of Kerman?”

Behruz has had enough talk about pastries and cars and trips. He blurts out in a way he never intended. “I have heard some very wonderful news from my father just two weeks ago.”

“Amir? You have heard from Amir. Uncle Hussain calls from the couch.

“Yes I have heard from my father,” Behruz replies, suddenly comfortable and feeling expansive.

“Are you in contact with him”, Uncle Hussain asks.

“Öh yes. My father calls me often.”

“Really. I have not heard much about my old cousin, “ Uncle Hussain says.

“He calls me all the time,” Behruz replies. “Once, twice a year at least. He always asks about the family, about how I am doing. He is most interested. “

“That is good to hear. Such a to do when he left.....is he doing well?

At the sound of his son, Amir's name, the grandfather opens his eye. "Eh, Amir...is he coming back?"

"No, no, Father. Behruz here is saying that Amir talks to him all the time.

The grandfather nods. "Doesn't he still own some property in Tehran. There was such a fight over it I remember....

Uncle Hussain replies.." Old news, Father. I am sure Behruz doesn't want to..."

Behruz interrupts, " No no its fine. I am my father's agent in the matter. That is one of the reasons he must call....to keep track of the case I ...I am his agent in this matter. I sign the papers for the lawyers and keep track of things for him. He depends on me."

Behruz pushes the tray on the table towards the children. They take more pastries.

Everyone is quiet, munching and drinking tea. Has the time come? Should he stand? .

Behruz begins to set the stage for his announcement. He turns to Uncle Abbas. "My father lives in San Diego. Is that close to where you live?

Abbas laughs. "Oh no, I... we live in Kansas, in Lawrenceville near the university. It is a thousand miles from San Diego. We are in the exact middle of the United States. We are mid westerners as they say in America. Your father is on the coast."

“Yes, I know he lives on the western coast”, Behruz replies, “I just thought Kansas was nearby.”

“Lawrenceville is as far from San Diego as Tehran is from...let me think”

“It’s okay, its okay I understand. They are far from each other.” interrupts Behruz”. If he is not careful, the conversation will turn to geography or the children will pipe in with their guesses or something equally without importance.

“Does he still have that import export business?” Uncle Hussain asks. “If there is a man who knows the exact moment when the oven is hot enough to bake bread, that man is Amir.

“ Yes, yes. Not only that, I must tell you all my father has given me great news.”

Everyone in the room smiles at him. They look at him expectantly. But they are quiet.

Even nervous Behruz feels the room’s sudden coolness

Behruz stops. Why should he tell them? They will pretend to be glad. They still do not care at all for his father, he knows. They will immediately think his father is just trying to fool them. Like he did everyone when he left. No no...what is he thinking. They are strangers. They do not know.

Then Uncle Hussein smiles and asks. “Well, Behruz, tell us what our cousin Amir has promised you.

A flash of movement catches Behruz’s eye. The American wife is looking around the room, at the floor actually. Ohh. The woman’s plum has slipped off her plate. It has rolled and stopped at Behruz’s shoe. He forces himself not to retrieve it for her. Don’t those people know how to eat fruit?

The people in the room despise his father for abandoning his mother. They do not know it was Behruz’s fault. He was such a crybaby. Always asking for things. Always taking his mother’s side when his father yelled at her. It was he, who had made his father so angry with everyone. His whole life has been to live the life his father wants him to live. Uncle Abbas will be sure to tell his father when he returns to the United States.

“In fact, my father called me two weeks ago” . Here it comes. He must get the term right. “He is getting me a... a green card. *A Green Card*, he uses the English term.” A green card to so that I can live in the United States. Isn’t that wonderful?” He turns to Uncle, “Soon I will be joining you in America.”

Uncle Abbas is startled. “A green card, you say. Are you sure that is what your father said?”

“I am positive,” laughs Behruz, .

“So”, Uncle Abbas repeats, “Your father told you that he is getting you a green card, so that you can live the United States? That he can get it for you even though you are not in the United States”

“Yes, yes,” cries Behruz. “Of course they are very hard to get, as you well know, Uncle.

Uncle nods. “Yes they are very difficult to get. I am curious, if I may ask, why did he tell you he was getting you a green card”

Behruz is happy to answer. “We were speaking about his children...his American children and I said that I would love, as I have always said to him, to come to the US and meet them, and may be work with him . Maybe this time when I said work with him, he may have realised what a good idea it was. I had never said that before and it was as if I had broken the ice between us, and of course he said, yes. Then we talked about the papers I had to sign about the property near the Caspian Sea and I told him I would have to get them from my mother, so it would be difficult. He was quiet for a minute. You see he was thinking. And I said, well I could really get the papers from my mother, and that it would be faster if I could actually bring the final papers to you , to the United States. I was kind of joking. But then he became serious. Are you asking for something. Something in return for those papers. I said no no of course not. But

then he said, I have been thinking. It might be good to get you what is called a green card. I could get you that. In the meantime, get the papers from your mother, get the lawyer and you to sign them.....and at the same time, I ... that is my father said, he will begin getting me a green card, and later when all is settled, he would send me the card and arrange everything for me to come and work with him.”

And he used the words green card?”his uncle presses.

“Well of course he could not use the exact words...he is very fearful of people listening in on his phone conversation, but course that is what he meant, that is the only way someone can work in the US, as you well know, Uncle.”

“Go on,” Behruz urges his uncle happily, “tell your wife.”

Uncle Abbas hesitates, then turns to Victoria, *Behruz just told us that his father who lives in the United States has told him that he will be getting Behruz a green card for him so that Behruz can move to the United States.*

Behruz waits for her cry of joy. But she only repeats the words *A Green card, are you sure. Because that's impos....*

Uncle Abbas interrupts. *I know, I know. But please, just smile and say you are very happy for him. Do it, please.*

Victoria turns to Behruz. She smiles and says in English. *That is great news, Behruz.*

Soon you will have to learn English!

Uncle says to Behruz, “She says you will have to learn English. She will teach you, in fact when you arrive.”

“Yes, yes,” Behruz claps his hands. “I will learn English. I have a whole year or maybe even less, but I will do it. Listen to this ...*How do you do?* Eh, eh, cannot I speak English already!” He looks around the room.

Uncle Hussain is smiling at him. Farideh is smiling at him. Uncle Abbas and his wife are smiling at him. His grandfather is still smiling.

Something is missing in their joy. Oh, perhaps it is that they are shocked. Yes that’s it. They have such a bad opinion of his father....well maybe not Uncle Abbas...but the others. And now they have been proved wrong.

“I have not told my mother yet. Its going to be difficult already to find the papers and talk to her about it. But of course the land does belong to him. And more importantly, she will be sad to see me go. But then, once I am there in United States, I will be in a position to get a green card for her. too. For everyone! “ He laughs waiting for the others to laugh.

Uncle Hussain says, “That is wonderful news, Behruz. My cousin always does the impossible. What do they say in America....the impossible takes a day longer?”

“Why do you say impossible?”, Behruz asks surprised. “My father said it was difficult, not impossible.”

“Yes, yes, that is what I meant, “ answers Uncle Hussain. “Your father is now an American so he can do things we don’t even realize.”

Perhaps they are all tired from their long drive, There seems to be such a lack of energy in the room where he had expected joy.

Farideh , moves slightly to allow her youngest child who has fallen asleep to rest on her lap. “It is very different living in the United States,” She turns to Abbas. “Did you find it hard when you first went there.”

“Yes, yes. It was very difficult. You have to work hard, and a lot of them have no idea about Persian culture, lots of things... you will see. It can be lonely.”

“My situation will be different, Uncle”, cries Behruz. “I will live with my father so I will not be lonely, I do not need an education as I already have attained my degrees, and my father will help me, whatever I need,.”

Behruz suddenly feels he is arguing with them.

Uncle Abbas replies. “ Of course, Behruz, your situation will be much different. In fact, Victoria and I will show you the middle west of the United States. It is not so beautiful like Iran. .. But there are lots of things to see and do.

“Of course Uncle. And I will need your advice as well.”

The room is so full of heaviness, Behruz can barely breathe.

Suddenly Farideh says, “ I am sorry Behruz....”

Behruz’s heart stops. What...what is she going to say....”Why, why are you sorry?”

“.... Look at this little one, already asleep. We have had such a long day of travel.”

Together as if they were an army , everyone stands up.

“Thank you so much for a wonderful time. Your house is so beautiful. “, Farideh says bundling the children towards the door, which Behruz has no choice but to open. The kids sleepily put on their shoes.

Hussain puts his large arms around Behruz. “ We are so proud of you. You have done so well. We will miss you very much if... when you go to the United States. “

“Thank you , Uncle Hussain, thank you” But it is still a long time yet, I will be visiting Tehran soon. There’s plenty of time to see each other, before I leave.”

Uncle Hussain then goes to help his father out of the chair.

“I will let you know when my father gets the green card for me. Perhaps we could have another celebration”, he cries.

Behruz turns and finds his Uncle, Uncle Abbas standing next to him. Behruz nods to Jane, the wife. But his eyes barely leaves the face of his Uncle. Behruz feels an ocean churning inside him. He has said nothing, nothing to this man.

Uncle is smiling. “I am so glad we had the time to see you. It brings back so many memories of my youth. I wish you well....”

“Uncle, Uncle, do you remember the tool box, the tool box you gave me?”

“The tool box? “

“The tool box, with the red pegs. You gave it to me for No Ruz just before you left for America.”

“Oh yes, How could I have forgotten. Such a wonderful set of tools. You were so little. I had to bend down to hand it to you. Did you ever get a chance to use it. And wait, I remember you ran away when I gave it to you. I thought you didn’t like it.”

“Oh no, no Uncle, NO” . Behruz is shocked. All these years, Uncle has never known how much the tool box has meant to him. “ I loved that box. It is my favorite thing of all time. I ...”

“I can’t believe you still have it,” cries Uncle

At that moment, Hussain calls from the doorway. “I am sorry Behruz, Abbas, but we must go.” He is holding a sleeping child in his arms. Jane, the rest of the family, shoes on, scarves in place, ready to go.

“Oh Yes yes Uncle, I still have it, the tool box.” Behruz holds his Uncle in a goodbye hug. But Behruz cannot lie. He adds, “ I still have the toolbox. It is in my heart,”

“You are a good boy”, his Uncle replies, “I am very proud of you. I will always be proud of you. You have accomplished so much and will continue to do so. I am sure of it”

Before Behruz can respond, everyone starts calling out, Hoda Hafez *Goodbye*. The American wife, too. Everyone hopes they never learn English the way she is learning Farsi.

Not two minutes later, Behruz is alone. The silence is so dense and complete it's as if no one had been here at all – as if they were merely apparitions who flitted in and out leaving only bits and pieces of pastry of their fleeting presence.

Automatically he picks up the dirty dishes and takes them to the kitchen. He returns for the tray of pastries. He places the few that remain into the box. He opens the refrigerator. The cantaloupe juice! He neglected to offer it. It has already separated, the thick blended part of the fruit floats like a heavy cloud above the thin pale green liquid. Even this, Even this. Even this,

He grabs the pitcher. He walks to the sink. Pours the juice in. Turning on the faucet, he watches it disappear down the drain.

FIN