

The Old Man and His Violin

The plane arrived on time and soon Khosro found himself in the vast, glittery Kennedy Airport. The customs officers, tall, cold-looking men, searched his suitcases and inside of his violin case suspiciously. Then they opened up the tin box containing *sohoon*, his son's favorite pastry he had brought along for him. They said something to each other, which Khosro could not understand, and then one of them put the box away on the other side of the counter, not letting him take it.

As Khosro entered the vast hall beyond the customs line, he looked for Majid but could not spot him. A wave of anxiety rushed through him. He looked this way and that, then he saw a man walking speedily towards him, smiling, and calling, "Father."

"Majid, my son," Khosro said. "My dear son."

They embraced and kissed.

"You look very well," Khosro said as they pulled apart.

"Father, it's so wonderful you're here."

"Yes, it has been too long."

"Susie had to stay in the car, it was hard to park near here. She's been looking forward to your coming." He led his father towards the car.

Susie was standing by a dark blue Mercedes. She and Khosro greeted each other and kissed. She was tall, thin, blond, even prettier than the photographs of her he had seen. She smiled at him and said something in English that he assumed was an expression of welcome. He smiled back and he got into the back seat.

Majid drove on the busy, vast Long Island Expressway, with hundred of lights glittering everywhere, then through a string of smaller, darker towns. He entered a tree lined street and pointed to a white, shingled house set alongside similar houses and said, "We're home."

Inside he said, "Let me take you to your room. It's the corner room with lots of light pouring in during the day. I know you like sunlight."

"You shouldn't have gone through any trouble," Khosro said.

Susie said something to him again with a smile.

Susie is saying this is your home," Majid translated. He added, "I'm glad you brought your violin." He carried his father's suitcase into the room and Khosro carried the violin.

"At the airport they looked inside the violin case suspiciously but then they let me bring it in. They took away the *sohoon* I brought for you."

“Yes, since 9/11 they’re very cautious at the airport. That’s the bathroom, if you want to take a shower. Take your time. We’ll have dinner when you’re ready.”

After Majid left the room, Khosro went into the bathroom. His muscles were aching from the long plane ride and he stood under the shower for a long time. Soorena must be with Shirin right now, helping with her children. He had been away from them only for a day but it seemed much longer, he missed them already. The drops of water on his skin soothed him a little but as he stepped out of the shower, he was startled-- the floor was flooded, some of the water flowing onto the hallway. He realized he had forgotten to put the curtain inside of the tub before he turned on the water. He stood in his spot for a moment, frozen with embarrassment.

He quickly put on the bathrobe he found on a hook and called Majid. Majid came in promptly.

“I’m an old man. I don’t know what I’m doing,” Khosro said. “It’s hard for me to travel, be away from home.”

Majid looked at the floor, then at his father. His heart gave a squeeze at the shame registered on his father’s face. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve done that too.” He left and came back with a mop. After he finished the task he said, “Come and join us when you’re ready.” Khosro dressed and joined them, giving them the presents he had brought for them-- hand painted boxes, the sweaters Soorena had knitted for Susie and Majid.

Then they went to the dining table in the L of the room to have dinner. Khosro played with his food. He was exhausted and the pot roast Susie had prepared tasted heavy and bland to him. Majid asked him questions about his mother, sister and her children, relatives and friends. One of Majid’s high school friends was still in Tehran, working for the Ministry of Education, and another worked for the oil refinery. He told his father he and Susie were going to try to start a family in a year or so when he was a little more established and she could quit working.

When they were finished eating he said to his father, “Talking about work, I must go to bed now. I’ve to see patients early in the morning. But I’ve scheduled a few days off at the end of the month to take you around to see more of the area. By then all the trees will be full of blossoms.”

They all got up. In bed Khosro kept tossing and turning. The room was furnished uniformly in dark teak. The blanket on the bed was a plain khaki color, almost like a hospital blanket. In fact, the room and what he had seen of the house had an antiseptic look he associated with institutions. The silence was oppressive. Except for an occasional car passing by, there was no hint of human life. He wished Soorena was with him. She had planned to come but then she had to stay on and help with their daughter’s three children, one just four months old, born prematurely. Neither he or Soorena had seen Majid for eight years. Majid had been busy with his work obligations and Susie could not get a visa. It had taken him and Soorena all these years to obtain a visa. He pulled up the blanket on him and finally fell asleep.

In the morning, when Khosro woke, Majid had already left for his office. Susie served him breakfast and the two of them made attempts to talk, using the few words she knew in Farsi and he knew in English, and a lot of gestures. After breakfast she drove him around Setauket, passing a post office, a bank, a supermarket, a pond with white ducks floating on its surface, and then to some of the surrounding towns.

At lunch time she took him to Majid's office, not far from the house. Majid introduced his father to two young women, a nurse and a secretary. They greeted Khosro warmly. Then Majid took him and Susie to eat at a sea food restaurant overlooking Long Island Sound. Khosro, being a secular Muslim observed only some of the rules of Islam. He prayed, fasted, gave alms, but he allowed himself to eat meat or fish which weren't prepared in the *halal way*. He was eager to try the local fish and then he was disappointed that it was so flavorless compared to what he was used to, fish from the Caspian Sea.

After lunch Khosro asked if he could get a haircut somewhere. Majid took him to a hair salon not far from the restaurant. Majid told his father he had to go back to work but Susie would do a little shopping on her own and then come back for him.

A young woman washed and dried his hair and then another woman cut it. He was used to going to all male salons, where only men were employed. It felt strange for women to be performing the tasks.

When he was almost done, Susie came in and they left together. She told him Majid had already paid.

She took him home, then left to go to work; she had a part time job as an interior decorator. Khosro wandered around the unfamiliar house, leafing through magazines and newspapers, understanding only some of the words.

When Majid returned home in the evening, he looked exhausted. He hardly talked to him or to Susie who had come home before him. He retired to bed right after dinner. Majid had been a lively, curious boy, Khosro recalled, a sensitive and introspective adolescent and, when a little older, before he left for America, a happy young man. Now married and with a house and a good practice in a prosperous Long Island town, he somehow did not seem happy.

Susie watched television and Khosro sat on the sofa, his hands folded on his lap, feeling sad that his son had gone to bed so early, not exchanging more than a few words with him, that he seemed so changed.

Days went by... slowly. Majid was usually gone by the time Khosro awoke. Khosro had breakfast with Susie and then she went about doing the household chores before leaving for work. Once, looking on the refrigerator door, Khosro found a note held by a magnet that Susie had left for Majid. He could understand a few of the words. "Try not to be too late tonight." The next day he found another note, "I love you." Underneath it, was written, "I love you too. Be patient." Be patient with what? Was it him they were referring to? Anyway it was odd that they would leave notes like that. Was it hard for them to say certain things to each other face to face? Maybe Susie was hard to talk to. There was something brusque about her. He himself would not have been comfortable talking to her even if he knew the language better. She was very different from Soorena and Shirin, with their soft way of talking, a flow to their movements.

He tried to pass time by practicing English, using a book Majid had brought for him one night, or taking walks in the neighborhood, though it was hard with no sidewalks anywhere and nothing except quiet houses to look at. For the first time in his life he had no desire to play his violin.

Majid rarely came home for lunch. He said he had no time to do that. Too bad, Khosro thought, lunch was such a joyful event at home. Relatives and friends got together and spent hours on the

meal-- five, six courses-- and they caught up with the events of each other's lives. No matter what problems might weigh on their chests, and there were many with all the turbulence in Iran, they would feel uplifted after sharing them. Fears, grudges, would be at least temporarily forgotten. All the ups and downs with the oppressive, arbitrary government rules seemed at a distance while they were in each other's company.

Once Susie dropped him off at the mall before she went to work. He wandered around, looked into store windows. He went into a supermarket and bought some grapes. The market was very different from the one at home, where heaps of fruits and vegetables were displayed on carts and you could touch and pick the ones you wanted. Here, everything was hidden behind something, wrapped up in paper, set behind glass. He was aware of a gulf between himself and the world around him here widening. "This is like prison," he said aloud. No one seemed to have heard him. Everyone went by indifferently. Their faces were so dispassionate that a substance other than blood could be running in their veins. There was no public transportation, no cabs to hail, so he had to stay in the mall for five hours until Susie was finished with work and picked him up.

What was he going to tell Soorena and Shirin when he returned home? If he had to describe what he had seen of this country, he would say that it existed in a dim and gray twilight. The trip was supposed to be for two months but having been here for two weeks, Khosro doubted that he could bear it that long. Majid must have given up a lot of himself to adjust to this world, he thought. There was something like denial that went with his attitude. It was as if he were trying hard to conceal a feeling from everyone, maybe unhappiness, regret of some kind? The Majid he recalled from the past simply wasn't there-- the child, the adolescent, the young adult he had known so well-- were barely represented in this man. Still, the love he felt for his son remained, an entity unto itself, inside his heart.

He remembered how growing up Majid had imagined a greater happiness for himself than one he could find in his own country with its oppressive government and outdated traditions. And Khosro, caught in his son's dream, worked hard to help him to achieve that future. He had been a carpenter, going from house to house, building cabinets, restoring old wooden walls or floors. He liked his job, giving him a chance to build things and enjoy their completion into shapes, and at the same time left his mind free to contemplate. But still he was glad that his son had ambitions to become a doctor and he did everything he could to help him go in that direction. As Majid reached the last year of high school, Khosro had had to work harder, taking on extra work in factories or at building sites so that he could afford sending his son abroad where he believed education was at a higher level. But he had hoped Majid would return home, set up practice there, be near his family, help his own people. Instead this had turned out to be that future, a world that did not include him.

Majid left his office early one afternoon, wanting to return home earlier than usual. He had begun to think: my poor father, he must be terribly bored, being forced to spend so much time alone. He tries to understand who I have become, apart from him, but how can I sum up for him what I cannot for myself? It had required so much effort to adjust to this culture, that it was hard for him to remember who he used to be; the changes that had come over him had been so gradual. Even falling in love with Susie, a woman so different from his mother, sister, and other women he knew growing up, and marrying her, had contributed to, were a part of, losing his old self.

Half way home, he remembered Susie had left a note for him to get butter, milk and some produce. In the supermarket, by the produce counter he noticed bags of dried fruit. His father, and he too, used to like dried cherries. He picked up a couple of bags of them and put them in the cart.

At home he found his father sitting on the living room sofa while Susie was preparing dinner in the kitchen. After he kissed Susie and unloaded the groceries, he went over to his father and handed him a bag of cherries. "For you Father."

"Dried cherries," Khosro said, smiling. He took out a few and began to eat them. Majid sat next to him. "Remember we used to pick cherries from Uncle's orchard? Mother dried them out in the sunlight."

"Yes," his father said wistfully.

"I miss Mother so much, too bad she couldn't come." As he said that, he was aware of a pressure on his chest. Having his mother in the house with Susie would have been difficult. She might have tried to instruct Susie in cooking or be critical of the house's decor. As he speculated on that, he became aware of how sterile the house truly was. "We need to add some color," he said aloud.

"I should have brought afghan throws for you."

Susie was calling Majid from the kitchen. "I'd better help Susie set the table," Majid said, getting up.

One night, after Khosro had been in his son's house for a month, he lay in bed thinking he was an unwanted guest. Majid had promised to come home earlier in the evenings but he never did after that one time. Susie was more and more silent with him and busy with her own tasks. He got out of bed and looked out of the window at the street. It was completely empty; not even a car went by. In Tehran you could see people on the streets at all hours. They would risk being arrested and rush out to discuss a demonstration to hold, or go to rooftops and shout their protests. Teenagers would be standing under the streetlights, debating different issues, men, singly or together, would be returning home from tea houses. Even at his age, a few times he had gone on the rooftop of their house and mingled his voice with that of others. The police who prowled around day and night arrested many. But at least people were struggling to make things better. Were people in America so content? Was the silence an indication of happiness or was it a sign of complacency? There was so much he did not understand about the country that his son had adopted.

He listened for any sounds of awakening from Majid and Susie but the second floor, where they slept, was silent. Impulsively, he put his long woolen poncho around him and went into the yard, carrying his violin. He suddenly felt he had to play it. The desire was irresistible. That was the only thing that would penetrate the maddening silence. He sat under a maple tree, above which the moon dangled, and he began to play. He played melodies from his childhood. The strings were already out of tune from lack of use and he could not tighten them just right, but the sound they made gave him pleasure anyway. He played softly, using the low scale. The shadows the trees cast began to look vivid, leaves and flowers sharply delineated.

"Play more," he could hear Majid's voice as a child saying to him." He played louder and louder, using sharper notes.

He saw several windows opening on the houses across the street. He saw heads leaning out of them and pulling back. His heart began to beat with excitement. The melody enveloped him, lifting him into another arena.

“Father, what’s going on?” Majid’s voice brought him back to reality. “A neighbor just called here... the sound is waking up her children.”

Confusion surrounded Khosro like a fog. What Majid said seemed to be coming from a bad dream. Susie came and stood next to Majid, looking on silently. Khosro went on playing, though he had begun to shiver. His teeth were chattering.

“Father...” Majid was now walking rapidly toward him. “Come inside, Father.” He and Susie took him inside and sat with him until he calmed down.

“I should go home. I don’t feel well.”

A few days later, Majid, after seeing his father off at the airport, burst out crying. He hadn’t done that for a long time. He could not get over the nagging guilt he felt that the visit had been a failure. Susie must have had similar feelings. “I wasn’t a good enough hostess,” she had said to him ruefully.

He imagined his father on the plane, over the Atlantic, a small, old man. He had no importance in the world except for the love of his family and friends for him. He tried to conjure up memories of his childhood, the long walks in the fragrant orchards hand in hand with his father, his father playing the violin for him, or sitting with him at night and listening to him talk about his future dreams, but the happy, peaceful images were fleeting. He felt a pain unlike any he had ever known. Now he longed to hear his father’s violin music, even if it had angered the neighbors. I have left something behind, he thought, something once tangible and alive but no longer within my reach.