

2

About Space and How Maryam Got Back a Verandah

Like many of the twenty-odd thousand villages in Iran, Deh Koh has grown rapidly and steadily over the last fifty years. The one-story houses of rocks, oak beams, and mud of the handful of original settlers, built close together for reasons of terrain and defense, have grown sideways and up the rocky slope into crowded, two-story adobe compounds as sons have taken wives and as herds and children have multiplied. Within the tumbled village no space is unoccupied, no matter how small, crooked, or seemingly inaccessible. A maze of alleys, tunnels, and stairways between adjacent compounds intersects the cramped village huddled against the flanks of the mountain. Vineyards are planted on the steep and sunny slopes above the village, and higher up still the pastures begin. In the hills on both sides orchards alternate with small fields among glittering irrigation channels lined with poplar trees, these tree-strudded hills pan out into larger fields that curve down to the stream dividing Deh Koh land from the neighboring village.

There is a sharp contrast between the overcrowded mud village—with its narrow paths winding between thick, windowless

walls that shield dirty yards and cramped living quarters atop dark barns, sheds, and stables; with its dust and odors and noises of too many living things cooped up in too tight a space—and the surrounding expanse of green hills, wooded valleys, and hazy blue mountains, silent save for the wind and an occasional bird. Yet for all its hot dust and dirt, until less than a generation ago the village was a haven of security against a multitude of enemies, almost a fort, guarded by tall fronts of blind, inhospitable house walls. At various times, on the short notice of a mere warning shout, the villagers had to be able to defend their brittle lives and few belongings against neighboring feuding villagers, marauding tribesmen, a khan's or shah's soldiers, swindling itinerant peddlers and dervishes, shrewd gypsies, thieves who drove off one's sheep at night, corrupt gendarmes, and officials. The farther one ventured from the village, the more endangered one felt. Until a decade ago nobody was foolhardy enough even to dream of leaving the confines of the village to build a lonely house out in the open, where the air was clean and the water clear. One did not dare be alone, at least not at night.

During the long, sun-filled days between the first of spring and the middle of fall, many families left the village together to set up camps in the high pastures with their animals. Of those who stayed behind, the men were out in their fields from dawn to dusk, and there were several occasions for the women, especially the young ones, to go out in small groups to gather wild vegetables and almonds by themselves, largely free of the tight responsibilities and restraints that ruled in the village. These were golden days of picnics and laughter, of playing pranks, of exchanging news with other women one didn't see much in the confined circles of movement at home. But such occasions were few, even before the zeal of revolutionary morality curbed even the most innocent ventures of the women. The women had to make do with what air and space and freedom there was among the sun-baked bricks and patches of shade in their own courtyards, whether their father's or their husband's.

Upon marriage a son would move into a room of his own, no matter how tiny, either a new one built onto those already there, or one evacuated by the death of an old relative or the emigration of a young one. The room was his and his wife's and their children's; the barns under it and the courtyard itself were held in common; the open space in front of the living rooms was part of the living

space—small and enclosed in some houses, wide and open in others, depending on the layout of the barns below and how crowded the compound was. The flat, earth-packed roof of the houses—the third floor, in effect—also was used: children played up there, and hay, fruits, and vegetables were dried on it all summer long. Each room had a fireplace with a smoke hole, as did each verandah in front of the room. In summer all cooking was done outdoors. In fact, in summer the rooms themselves were used almost exclusively for storage and sleeping, while the activities of everyday life took place elsewhere for men, and for women on the verandah or in the courtyard: cooking and eating, baking bread, visiting, sewing, weaving, washing, mending, spinning, milking, buttering, making cheese, cleaning wheat for the mill, pounding rice in a wooden mortar, nursing children, arguing, looking out over the village, dreaming, keeping tabs on the neighbors' movements. On the verandah one was out in the open yet entirely at home, able to talk and listen and learn, yet safely sheltered inside one's walls, able to look and see yet by dint of a linguistic convention properly secluded, even without a veil.

For men and boys, who had the run of the village by virtue of their gender (and even were encouraged to be out—a man or boy who preferred sitting at home to sharing the company of others in the open fields or in the village lanes was labeled a sissy), the house and the verandah were places of rest and of the chores of upkeep, such as squeezing the excess water out of the flat roof during a rain to prevent it from seeping through the ceiling, or clearing the snow off for the same reasons. On the verandah, men ate and drank and waited for night to fall, one entertained a guest there or talked over the affairs of the day. For the women and girls the verandah was the place to live one's life, no less, within the confines of a horizon marked by the distant blue hills beyond the ochre haze of Deh Koh and the watchful eyes of the other women in one's own courtyard, and the next, and the one above. The fact that a woman was hardly ever alone was reassuring for matters of security, but it was a heavy emotional burden nevertheless. Indeed, it was said, nothing made brothers split up faster than their wives fighting each other at home.

But times have changed. Over the past two decades khans have been divested of power, robbers have been disarmed, prosperity has slowly crept up into the forgotten valleys, and roads have widened

the world of Deh Koh. An increasing number of young families have decided to leave the old quarters and to build new houses out in the fields, city style, each with its own patch of garden around it and sheltered by a wall not so much against enemies as against the inquisitive eyes of strangers. Those who remained could take over the vacated rooms in their compounds and breathe easier, or else let the unused buildings be washed down by the rains into the mud from which they were built. The beams were salvaged and reused in the new houses and the rest was melted into heaps of dirt, to be raked a bit and planted with some herbs or sunflowers—tiny patches of color in the mottled brown adobe.

Khorshid's father had started his own courtyard with a small barn and one room above in the back of his father's north wall, through which a tunnel provided passage between the two yards. To the east the corner of a cousin's house together with a short wall connecting this corner with the western front corner of another relative's house provided a safeguard against trespassers, and the back wall allowed for adding more barns and living rooms. To the north there was a little open space with two walnut trees and another wall beyond, running at a southwestern angle, forming a narrow alley along Khorshid's father's wall. This alley opened into one of the main lanes—hardly wide enough for two donkeys passing each other—along an arm of the water channel. In fact, the alley was blocked by an old willow tree, and after regularly cursing it twice a day whenever the sheep and goats would balk at squeezing by it, Khorshid's father finally felled it and made of it a sturdy bridge over the channel.

Khorshid's father had three sons, all of whom built next to him, filling the many-angled space with three barns and living rooms, each at slightly different planes from the other, so that the respective verandahs were not quite level and had to be connected by steps of varying height. Khorshid and his brothers and all their wives proved amiable enough not to split up as long as they lived. Khorshid's first wife died young and childless. His second wife, Maryam—a cousin who had lived in a room backing Khorshid's and only had to move through the tunnel and up Khorshid's stairway into her new home when she got married—was much younger than Khorshid and bore only one child, who died. Khorshid's two other

brothers, both older than he, each had two sons who survived a whooping-cough epidemic that had killed a quarter of the young children one winter. The four sons eventually cut down the walnut trees, starting a dispute over ownership that lasted into the next generation, and built this space up to the north wall, adding slanted verandahs and crooked stairways. At one time fifteen adults and twelve children were living in the compound together with some eighty sheep and goats, five cows, six donkeys, and about three dozen chickens, on a piece of land measuring about sixty by seventy feet.

Khorshid's nieces were married off in good time and moved out, as did his four nephews' daughters. With four childbearing women in the courtyard there was always a girl old enough to fill the important role of little servant, of fetcher and bringer and minder of babies and chickens and milkpots, to take the place of the older sister or cousin who got married and was lost to her mother's house. Three children fell off the open verandah—a common enough happening but shocking nevertheless. One of them, a girl, broke her leg and limped badly from then on, another, a toddler not yet walking, fell on a heap of hay, unharmed, by the providence of God, and one, a boy just about to cut his second front teeth, unruly, wild, and moving fast like any healthy boy of that age, tripped and fell down while chasing another at high speed over the whole length of the semicircle of verandahs, watched by his helpless relatives. He was dead when they got down to him. But otherwise the children did well. Whooping cough and measles had lost their scare, thanks to the doctor in the next village and the health teams from the city that passed through and coaxed reluctant mothers into vaccinating their babies. Once a baby had survived the never-ending diarrheas and colds of the first two years, there was a good chance it would survive.

Year after year one of the women was pregnant. Although Khorshid's parents and brothers had died, space became scarce and the fragmented fields no longer yielded enough food for the large families. One by one Khorshid's nephews found seasonal work in the city. One even sold all his animals and went to Kuwait for two years, to come back a rich man. He was the first of his brothers to build a house out in the fields—a big, roomy one with a bath and a kitchen such as he had seen used abroad, a house with a cement floor, a slanted tin roof, large grated windows, and a solid stone

wall around the garden. Proudly they left, leaving the others to fight over their vacated room.

Then Khorshid died all of a sudden in his sleep.

Maryam, by far the youngest of the older generation, and by far the brightest and most energetic of all the women in the courtyard, had been the dominant figure even while her mother-in-law, too old and worn out to be of much use or importance, was still alive. Backed by her brothers in the adjacent compound, and just as alert and assertive as they were, she had diminished her handicap of lack of children very cleverly. She built up her position of power by the sheer dominance of her personality and the clever manipulation of her brothers and cousins. None of the younger women ever brought up the topic in her presence, no matter how tempted they surely felt to do so during the infrequent but high-pitched arguments with her. Maryam was strong in will and body. While the other women around her withered quickly into middle age, depleted from childbearing and child rearing, malnourished and anemic, only too glad to delegate work and responsibilities to their daughters, daughters-in-law and sons, Maryam stood straight backed, small, with head held high, and her quick, dark eyes watched her own and Khorshid's interests with undivided alertness. While Khorshid's brothers' land, equal to Khorshid's in size, was too little for the mouths it was supposed to feed, Khorshid's was yielding a surplus. Paying some relatives with his wheat, he had planted one of the finest vineyards in the village with their help and later, when the Shah's government provided apple trees, one of the largest orchards. He was in partnerships—organized by Maryam—with a great many of his poorer relatives, providing land and water against their good labor and successfully keeping a watchful eye on their honesty. Although neither was generous by nature, Maryam realized very early that acts of largesse on their part yielded far more than their initial cost in the compensations to come. Maryam was the mastermind behind all their successful endeavors, and Khorshid and everybody else knew it.

At home, unencumbered by children, she had time to see to the affairs of the whole courtyard. All the children had a healthy respect for her, and none ever disobeyed her orders (although they became experts at dodging them). The verandahs were always swept, even that of her youngest nephew's wife, who was sick a lot. Even the

yard below, the barnyard for all practical purposes, was cleaner than most others. All the children in her compound were sent to school, boys and girls alike. Wasn't her brother the school principal? Were not two of her own nieces teachers? Although she never went out to pick berries or gather wild vegetables, more blackberries and wild spinach and wild onions were drying on their roofs than on anybody else's. Wherever she went — to a funeral, a sick relative, a wedding — she came with her entourage of sisters-in-law and nephews' wives, respected and honored if not liked.

After Khorshid died Maryam had to make some choices. Customarily at her age her sons would have taken care of her, but she had no sons. If she were younger, one of Khorshid's brothers would have to take her on as a second wife. But Khorshid's brothers were dead anyway. One possibility was to go and live with her brothers, but this Maryam found unappealing. By now two of her three brothers had moved out of their old courtyard, and she would have had to make a choice among the three of them and their wives. For Maryam it would have meant moving from a position of dominance and control into one of subordination — becoming, in her eyes, a servant. She did not want to be a servant for any of her sisters-in-law. And there was yet another possibility: remarriage.

Maryam considered it with realistic circumspection. Her age, she knew, was not an encumbrance in itself. Although older in years than her wrinkled sisters with their grownup children around them, Maryam looked and felt much younger. There was not a gray hair under her scarf; her arms were round, her breasts firm, and she could climb stairs without wheezing. She had been around a long time, yet she was not old. There were several middle-aged widowers in the village, a couple of them even eligible relatives. But perceptive as she was, she appreciated their problems very well. For a man who still wanted children she was a bad risk, even if there was a tacit understanding that her barrenness probably had been due to Khorshid's inadequacy and not hers. For a man with grown sons, on the other hand, she was not old enough, there was still just a chance that she might have children, which would obviously not be in the interest of the older children. Against the opposition of his sons an older man had little chance to take a youngish wife. Also, there was the matter of Khorshid's property. She was certain that as long as she had her strength and faculties none of her husband's neph-

ews would press her to relinquish what, by rights, could be seen as their due inheritance. In any case she would fight back ably, and they knew it. But if she were to get married again she would either have to sell whatever she could (which undoubtedly would cause bad fights she did not particularly care for), only to have to give the money to her new husband, or else the vineyards and orchards and the fields of wheat and clover would be claimed successfully by Khorshid's nephews, especially those who already had worked the land for many years. She would be mistress in a new house again instead of a widow living all by herself, but the price was very high. Maryam decided on the last choice, namely, to wait and see, and to hold onto the bird in hand.

This was not easy. Khorshid had not actually worked much on his land, but he had watched that none of his partners cheated him, and he had gone out at nights to guard his share of water as it came down the channels to make sure no one else drained it into other fields. He had hustled at the agricultural office for his share of insecticides; he had struck deals with a distant cousin who co-owned a tractor; he was there when the fruit dealer from the city came up to weigh the apples. None of these chores Maryam felt she could possibly do herself, being a woman. Neither could she procure hay for the cow or take the sheep out to pasture when it was her turn in the cooperative herd. She sold the cow, the donkey, the sheep and goats. Instead of using the money to buy more apple trees or another piece of land, as she would have advised Khorshid to do, she lent it for interest. Although she was illiterate and had to do all her book-keeping in her head, this enterprise was successful. At the next opportunity she sold one of the apple orchards, a small one which Khorshid had been working himself, so there was not much objection from the nephews. Then one of Khorshid's partners got an offer from somebody for a field right outside the old village, by now prime development land, and Maryam agreed to sell and split the profit. Although she lost out on this deal, she knew very well that in a few years the former partner would consider the land his own and his sons would simply take it, on the grounds that they had worked it for so many years. It was standard practice in the village, even if it caused endless disputes and drawn-out court cases. Some weeks later, when the school administration was looking for a piece of land to build a new boys' school, Maryam worked on her brother, the prin-

cipal, to get the administration to buy the one vineyard that was so conveniently located only a little way off the main road. He succeeded; the nephew who had been in charge of it protested loudly, but his sons were too young to back him up and the deal was put through too swiftly for him to prevent it. Again, Maryam split the profit to keep him quiet, but she knew the others were on guard now and it probably was the last transaction she would be able to pull off. She was right, except for some poplar trees she managed to pass on to Ali, Ahmad and Perjan's son-in-law, when he was building his house on Ahmad's land. As she expected, the returns from the orchards and fields diminished as the partners came to view them as their own and began to regard the tribute they paid to Maryam as charitable gifts rather than her right. Luckily, by then, Maryam had enough money lent out to make a small income, large enough for her few needs and steady enough to make her totally independent.

But fate overtook her in other ways. In the back of her compound all her brothers had moved out into new houses at the outskirts of the village in opposite directions. Gone were the days of just slipping through the tunnel for a quick chat, counsel, news, to borrow or lend something, to keep up. Never too fond of her, and too conscious of their own importance to compromise it by walking through the village and paying her an official visit, her sisters-in-law stayed home, just as Maryam did for the same reasons. (Her youngest nephew's wife she did not see for almost two years after the move.) Half of her own father's courtyard fell to ruin, and the other half was transiently occupied by newlywed nephews and cousins' children before they had enough money to build their own houses elsewhere. The tunnel collapsed. To go to her father's old courtyard now Maryam had to climb two ladders over a high roof. It was not worth the effort. But in her own courtyard the same exodus happened. Both of Khorshid's remaining nephews (her own cousins' sons as well) started to make sun-baked bricks of mud and straw, and cement blocks. They could not afford the heavy stone and cement structures of the *nouveau riche* like their younger brother who had worked in Kuwait, but their own savings allowed them to put up at least a traditional house, modified and enlarged to include a separate kitchen and a "good" room, surrounded by its own private wall. Illiterate and unskilled as they were, the economic

stagnation following the revolution had diminished their opportunities for outside work during the agricultural off-season. Money was very scarce and building material was expensive and in short supply, but the prevailing feeling was nevertheless to build now rather than later, because there might not be much of a later.

Within a few months Maryam had the courtyard to herself. The far northern rooms had been taken down by their owner so he could use the old poplar beams for the roof of his new house. His own few poplar trees around one of his gardens were not thick enough yet for the purpose, and, like so much else, lumber was priced beyond his means. For a while the second nephew still used his barns for his two donkeys and hay, and his old living quarters to store wheat behind heavy padlocks until he could build stables in his new courtyard. But except for his infrequent short stops, for the first time in her life Maryam was totally alone.

Beyond the heap of rubble that remained of the northern buildings, Maryam, sitting in the bright sun outside her own room, now had an unobstructed view to the high southern front of her neighbors—people she never had had much to do with and who were even less appealing now because one of their sons had become a revolutionary guard. Once in a while he would mount a loudspeaker on the corner of their high roof and blast revolutionary march music over the village (totally alien in style and intonation to any music Maryam was used to), or announcements, or some preacher's canned, unintelligible sermon. There was nothing now, not even a tree, to shield Maryam from this piercing noise. Yet she could not complain about it, either. It was, after all, a form of governmental action, and one did not criticize the government. Besides, she rarely saw the young man himself, and what good would it do to complain, however carefully couched in sarcasm or a joke, to his parents who suffered under it just as she did and were just as paralyzed to resist it? As long as she had had company in her courtyard and her brothers' courtyard in the back, the women had talked freely about the loudspeaker and the young man and made fun of both, saying things like, "who wants to go to heaven if this is all one hears there?" Or, "you know why the saints in heaven don't answer our pleas any more? Because they are all deaf from this music and can't hear us." Now Maryam had no one to talk to but herself, a condition she found boring and unsatisfactory, even if her own replies to herself

never led to the arguments and fights of normal human conversation. Maryam also acutely felt that she was not keeping up with news, not even in her own family. Once a week she would go to the bathhouse (their own bath was a rather makeshift affair her nephew had built and then ruined when he went after his house beams). This she did more for the company than for cleanliness, but the clientele of the bathhouse was dwindling as people built their own shower stalls into or onto the new houses. Even Perjian, Maryam's youngest sister, had taken to frequenting the bath in her sister's house, for fear, she said, that little Shala would somehow come to harm in the public bath, and Maryam did not see either of them for several months, until the second sister fell sick and Maryam had a valid reason to go and visit her without losing face.

Indeed, there were so few legitimate opportunities for a woman to go out now. As a widow without sons she had to do her shopping herself, but how much shopping does one woman need? A little meat once in a long while, some fruits, a spool of thread, a box of cookies for the rare visitor. . . . Sitting on an old rug at the edge of the verandah, she could see a few yards of the road outside her alley and the people walking by just long enough to recognize them. If Maryam saw a particular woman she liked to talk to approach the water faucet by her bridge, just outside her field of vision, sometimes she would grab one of her own big plastic bottles and empty it, if need be—water got warm and stagnant in them soon anyway, in contrast to the old goatskin bags that had held the water in pre-plastic times—and saunter down to the water spout a few steps to the right outside her alley. But how often and for how long could a self-respecting woman linger at the water? Besides, more and more often she was asked there how much longer she would stay here alone, and whether she wasn't afraid to live by herself, and what if a thief would come? More disturbingly, there were also veiled remarks by her closest relatives to the effect that her independence gave the embarrassing impression in public that she had no one to go to, and that this opinion was unfounded and resented by her family. These insinuations were another reason for her to limit her contacts, especially with her brothers and their wives.

Maryam found herself not only alone in a lot of empty space but also with a lot of empty time on hand. Until a few years back Maryam could have taken her spindle and joined the other women

on one of her neighbors' porches, keeping busy while visiting, any time. But she had no more fleece to spin. Her sheep were long gone, as were her nephews' sheep—sold, most of them. Her two rooms were immaculate and stayed so day after day. Once she had swept the yard below, it stayed clean. Cleaning the handful of rice for her evening meal was a matter of minutes. The bread she baked lasted and lasted. Lately, young women had taken up needlework. Indeed, her niece Golgol could draw a wonderful pattern of flowers and vases onto a piece of white fabric—the girls in school all had her do it—but Maryam, almost an old woman by any standard, felt she could not very well amuse herself with a pastime of the young. Her routine chores, a little mending and sewing, and her waterpipe were all she had to fill the long hours of the day.

In a corner of the deserted courtyard Maryam planted a few cucumbers and tomatoes and the pits of some peaches and sunflowers. Although the sparrows got most of the seeds, a little garden was sprouting—green, easy on her eyes, a patch of life, and one more good reason to haul water from the water faucet. The nephew, however, was fidgety when he saw the little plants. "Not that I want to suggest anything, Aunt Maryam," he said. "No harm done, for sure, by holy Abbas, but just to keep the record straight: this is my land, it was my barn that stood here, and my house, all along here to the corner over there, and you know it. No, don't say anything, don't fret, just eat your cucumbers, God bless them, but I just want to say that maybe one of my sons will want to come back up here one day, one never knows, and this is our land, not yours, not my brothers, not Uncle Khorshid's, as you know."

Although taken aback, Maryam was not really surprised at that speech. Three of her nephews were fighting with a cousin in their deserted courtyard over a few fruit trees he had planted there, on their land. They argued with him but also with each other, as each claimed the very spot on which the little trees stood. Disputes over a few feet of soil were happening all over the village. "Don't you worry," Maryam said with dignity and contempt, "you will get your share of the sunflowers like any landlord, for sure. Just send one of your kids, I won't cheat you!" But she was so upset about it that later in the afternoon, spotting her brother walking by on the road from school, she took her veil and followed him to his house and there complained bitterly to him and his wife.

"Sister," said Kerim, "my house is your house. The lad is a scoundrel. But why are you staying there? It is not good for you to live alone. Here is room enough for you."

"Yes, indeed, by holy Abbas, we are devoted to you," said his wife, half-heartedly and with a stony face.

"I appreciate your devotion," murmured Maryam, and fled.

At home, she did some hard thinking. Kerim's suggestion that she should give up her place lately had become his standard reply to all of her complaints. In one form or another everybody urged her to leave, even Perjan, who knew very well that Maryam did not really get along with any of her sisters-in-law. They had been close neighbors for too many years not to know this; they all realized how fragile was the heavy mask of familial politeness, how easily it cracked in the shuffle of everyday life. Kerim would probably insist that Maryam move in with his household, since by virtue of his education and his position in the village he was the head of the whole family, and he had the means to support her easily. If Maryam were to go to Kerim's he would make her divest herself of all the property Khorshid's nephews could possibly lay a claim to in order to prevent disputes with them and probably give up her own money, too. She could not imagine him allowing her to have her own business deals in his house. If, on the other hand, she would choose to live with any other brother—her youngest, for example, whose wife, easygoing and much younger than Maryam, had always been devoted to her with great respect and only such a faint hint of insubordination that Maryam was sure she could squelch it easily—there would be different problems. This brother was so poor that he would see to it that she got the lion's share of Khorshid's land (for him to use), even if it meant a distasteful fight with his cousins. Without illusion Maryam appreciated his position and her own in this arrangement. He had a house full of young children and very little land. With her money he would build onto the already overcrowded new house ("for your comfort," he would tell her); his life would ease a little, and in no time she would share his poverty, unequally though, because in a few years she would be old and useless, a burden no one would feel the familial obligation to carry with grace.

She would stay and fight.

No suitor had come. Another husband quite clearly was not her fate. After Khorshid's death she had donned the darker colors

fitting for a widow, and she kept to them. For one thing, after the revolution even the young women dressed themselves in the purples and dark greens that formerly had been signs of old age and mourning, but also she felt she could move more easily through the public places outside her own house if she projected the image of an old woman. Although unlike most of her peers she was in excellent health and did not huff and puff on the steep slopes, like most women she walked slowly through the lanes, stopping here and there to exchange a few words, to listen to news. A few years back she would have considered this not quite proper. When she still was in charge of her courtyard she ushered her young women through the village at a dignified good pace and did not encourage them to linger. But now, she figured, a little laxness in this regard was the smaller of two evils. She started to seize every decent opportunity to visit a wide circle of relatives, to sit at sickbeds, to help out at weddings, to mourn untiringly any death. She even joined the groups of women who, after the revolution, had adopted the urban custom of visiting the graveyards on Thursday afternoons to mourn the dead—to sit among the ornate new graves, to wail, to exchange sweets and fruits they brought along for sacrifice, to remind those who had lost a son or a brother in the war of their misery and to remind those who hadn't of their luck, to gossip a little, to sing a few mourning songs with high-pitched voices. Maryam had Khorshid to mourn, as well as the fact that she had no children living and none to lose. But mainly, Maryam went there for the same reason she sought out the company of people other than her brothers and sisters, namely, to bolster her claim to independence, to persuade everyone that she was able and determined to stay on in her place, to ensure herself of their support. She used the others—the distant cousins, the aunts, the cousins' children, the wide network of her family—as moral support and to put pressure on her own brothers if the need should arise.

All this happened over one long summer and fall. Maryam bought a small kerosene heater and a gas cooking burner to avoid most of the cumbersome necessity of getting firewood. Long before the first rains of early winter, with the help of Perjan's son she had her own two rooms waterproofed by spreading tar-soaked sackings on the flat roof. This did away with having to climb up onto the roof during a rain to press the water out of the soaked earth with a

heavy oak roller so that the rain wouldn't seep through the roof. As this was a man's job and the oak roller was heavy, the chore had been one of her brothers' more powerful arguments against her staying in her house alone. She paid for this job herself, and none of her brothers could say anything. The verandah, as important a space to live in as her rooms, she could take care of herself; it was not as big as the roof and was right outside her door.

But her two nephews' barns and storage rooms adjacent to hers, unprotected and uncared for, started to melt and crumble under the heavy rains and the snow of that winter. In her own interest Maryam urged and argued that the men attend to their property, but to no avail. Instead, when the first warm and dry breezes of spring blew in from the south, one morning the two men and three of their sons, without any warning that would have given Maryam time to prevent them, stood there with their pickaxes and shovels and started to take the buildings down to get to the beams. There was nothing Maryam could do. The houses were theirs to do with as they pleased, so were the barns underneath. She gathered all her belongings from the porch and locked them into her rooms to get them out of the dust, and then climbed onto her roof to escape the clouds of dust enveloping the scene of destruction. Her house would stand alone now, surrounded by rubble, leaning against the back wall of the house still standing in her brothers' old courtyard. It was not considerate of the nephews to claim those beams now—in a few years she would be dead anyway—but beams were good money. She knew this all too well. Annoying as the affair was, it was not alarming, she thought.

Maryam was in for a surprise. The settling dust revealed a catastrophe: Maryam, perched on her roof with her headscarf drawn half across her face, looked down not onto her verandah but into an abyss. The roofs of the barns that had formed part of her porch had overlapped, and with the collapse of the supporting barn structures almost all of her verandah had been ripped off. Her fireplace was gone, so was the little branch hut shading the water containers and the edge jutting out far enough to give her a lookout into the alley. Her stairway leading up from the alley was broken, one-half gone, the other hanging crookedly and raggedly on the remainder of its support of branches and short beams. To get down from her rooms to level ground Maryam would have to climb onto her roof—where

she now sat, rigid with consternation—then up another ladder onto her brother's higher roof, and from there down into their courtyard and out another alley and through a half-tumbled tunnel to the road. Maryam was perched high up on dusty beams with nowhere to go.

The two nephews and their sons were just as bewildered. No one had realized that the barn roofs had been so interconnected that most of them would come down if only a part was taken away. The men had suspected (in shrewd silence) that a corner of Maryam's porch would go, but not this much. As soon as she had back her voice, Maryam jumped up and, arms flailing, started to give a long, drawn-out wail, the most powerful signal of distress in public. "Woe to me," she shouted in between the shrill screams, "the heathens are destroying me, an old woman, woe to me!"

The youngest of the nephews' sons, an optimistic lad of about fourteen, was the fastest to respond. "It doesn't matter," he yelled. "We'll fix it, shut up." But Maryam took this assurance for what it was: the standard noncommittal reaction to most calamities involving other people's property.

"People, come here," she shouted, louder still, to the figures emerging on the rooftops around her. "People, God is my witness, my own relatives, my own cousin's sons are robbing me, are violating my rights!"

Meanwhile her younger nephew, Faraj, and two of the boys had heaved themselves up onto what was left of the porch, balancing precariously on the wobbly beams, and were gesticulating with great animation up to Maryam. "Be quiet," they bellowed. "Come down, shut up, no one is harming you, do you understand? Shut up!" And then the younger nephew scuttled up the ladder to her and grabbed her. "We'll repair it," he said, to no one in particular, but loud enough for all the neighbors to hear. "It was an accident; we will get it together right away, come down and tell us what you want. We didn't mean any harm, we will set it right right away." At this public proclamation Maryam let herself be persuaded to climb down, which was not without danger, since the ladder was very close to the sagging edge of the mutilated verandah.

As long as there was light enough they were as good as their word. While the boys shored up the pitiable rest of the porch with beams they dug out of the adobe ruins, the two older men tried to

restore the stairs to at least temporary usefulness. But night was falling fast, and they had neither hammers nor nails with them. "Don't fall," they said to Maryam when they left. "Be careful, don't go down without a lantern. We will be back tomorrow and do it right."

"What about the porch?" Maryam asked with justified suspicion.

"The porch too, of course," said the older nephew, "by holy Abbas."

"Yes, yes," said Maryam, "Saint Abbas is a very busy man with you. Don't trouble him, just come yourself."

The next day, a Saturday, all the boys were in school until afternoon. It was Faraj's turn to take the cooperatively herded cows out to pasture, so he was out the whole day. The older nephew, Ezad, and his son had promised to work on somebody's house, for a wage. They sent word that they would come in the evening. Another piece of the porch fell while Maryam was climbing the wobbly stairs with a heavy pail of water. The worst was that her toilet, an outhouse built onto a corner of the barn, was inaccessible, possibly even destroyed, and she had quite a walk to get to the one in her brother's yard. She had meant to bake bread that day but was too hot, cramped, and upset to start making dough. Instead she walked all the way out to Perijan to borrow a few flatbreads from her. Perijan was ready to commiserate, but also full of the tiresome advice to go where she belonged, namely, to her brothers.

In the evening, an hour or so before it would be dark, Ezad, his long, skinny frame scooping after a long day's labor, came with his son and his tools. They were annoyed when they saw that no one from the other party had shown up, and Ezad sent his son to fetch at least the young cousins. This took another good while, which Ezad and Maryam used to argue about what should be done. She said she needed the outhouse dug out and repaired, and she needed her own barn back in usable shape, all of it, and the verandah rebuilt, and the stairs fixed. Ezad reduced these demands to their more essential meaning: Maryam needed some sort of outhouse, some porch (which automatically would provide a woodshed underneath), and some sort of stairs. Even scaled down the restoration would be a lot of work they could ill afford now. The boys would have to salvage adobe bricks, old beams would have to be cut to size, and the sump of the outhouse was probably filled with debris and would have to

be emptied. "The black death," Ezad said over and over, with great feeling, by way of a curse.

That evening, after the party finally had assembled (minus Faraj, who had sprained an ankle), the boys stacked a small pile of reusable bricks and Ezad shored up the stairs a little more, and together they cleared a path to the barn below Maryam's house so that she could use the barn as an outhouse, they said. Maryam refused to use it, though, not so much for hygienic reasons (in the past barns were used as toilets) but because she suspected that once she started using it the restoration of her outhouse would lose urgency and she might end up having none for good. Instead, ostentatiously swinging the long-spouted water can used for the necessary ablutions and stopping to exchange words here and there with passersby, she would slowly walk around to her brother's dilapidated outhouse or to that of Begom and Akbar, her neighbors across the lane, which was, however, rather dirty and not much better than the barns of old.

The next day Maryam was at a mourning party at a neighboring village all day long. When she came back at night the brick pile was a little higher, but nothing else had changed. The following morning Ezad came bright and early, poked around in the vicinity of the outhouse and found its roof collapsed, and left with many exclamations of "Black death." Maryam asked her neighbor Akbar to help her take down the ladder to her roof for her to use instead of the increasingly unsteady ruins of the stairs. The next day the sky was cloudy. The first rains would start soon and wash away the rest of the porch. When only two of the boys came in the afternoon to find more bricks, Maryam became so annoyed that she walked out to Ezad to remind him of his promise. He was not at home, however, and his wife told Maryam that she was inconveniencing Ezad beyond reason and that she should go and live with her brothers as was only right and proper. After telling her in no uncertain words how little she thought of this advice, Maryam marched back to the southern edge of the village to complain to Faraj about the unfinished work and Ezad's wife's insolence. Faraj was at home and promised to be there the next day. His ankle was still swollen, Maryam could see it herself.

After a week or so, Maryam had become rather dextrous in hauling pails of water up and down the ladder, wide skirts notwithstanding.

ing. She had baked bread indoors, which was very hot and uncomfortable, and had watched, practically from her doorsill, the few half-hearted attempts of the boys and the nephews to tackle the job. The progress was nil.

With a heavy heart she went to Kerim and to her second brother, and to her youngest. Each told her that he would do what he could, little as it might be considering that Ezad and Faraj were not their own sons, and that she should probably give up the house altogether. But the unenthusiastic reactions of her brothers' wives provided some consolation: the women did not cherish the prospect of joint housekeeping any more than Maryam did and therefore were her allies. So stubbornly and determinedly Maryam fought for her cause, lobbying with all her accessible neighbors and relatives and preparing the scene for the showdown she knew she would have to precipitate.

Midmorning right after the first slight rain, which had flushed holes out of the remainder of her unprotected and unprotected porch, she dressed herself in a black skirt, took a black veil out of her bundle of clothes, pulled her hair out to give herself a disheveled look, took in a deep breath and let out a scream that lasted until she was in the main alley. By then she had an audience lined up on verandahs and in doorways. Recounting at the top of her lungs in telegraphic simplicity the highlights of the insults and broken promises of her relatives, without mentioning names, she stormed down through the village towards the main crossroads, shouting her intention to go to the police to complain publicly and without reservations—she, an old woman, who was being done in by her own family.

In no time the children brought the bad news to Kerim in school around the corner, to her brothers and cousins, and eventually to Faraj and Ezad in the fields. A first-rate scandal was in progress, and Kerim, as the head of the family and warden of his sister, felt acutely distressed. He was furious with Faraj and Ezad; he was equally furious with Maryam, whom he saw as the ultimate cause of the trouble, and he was furious with his own wife, who had made it clear that she did not much care to live under one roof with his sister. He knew it was no different in his second brother's house. Now he and his brothers would have to deal with this private family matter, which had transformed itself through the stupidity of some stub-

born and quarrelsome women and the irresponsibility of some young good-for-nothing male relatives into a public show of indignation, it left him looking incapable of managing his family with providence and dignity.

By the time Kerim arrived at the spectacle in the village's main crossroads Maryam had worked herself into a fine state of fury. She was disheveled, her hair had long escaped the scarf, the veil had fallen to her shoulders, and she was trembling as she screamed her protests and violently announced her firm intention to complain to the police, the revolutionary guards, the governor, the Imam Khomeini himself, about the injustice she suffered from her own kinsmen. A few of the men, beholden to Kerim by kinship or other allegiances, had blocked her progress towards the police further down the road, but Maryam had reckoned on this, indeed had hoped for it. She had no intention of lodging an official complaint, which would have brought disgrace on all her family, including herself, and would have alienated them from her. She had counted on the matter being resolved right there in the square. However, at this point she was ruled by genuine fury and it was just as well that these men were there to restrain her until one of her brothers would deal with her. Kerim and his son-in-law pounced on her and held her firmly, calming her down with assurances that they would set everything right, with explanations to the spectators, with curses on Faraj and Ezad (four of their children were in the crowd), with solemn oaths that Kerim personally would see to the restoration of her house, with pleas to the more esteemed among the bystanders to bear witness to the promises. In the end, Maryam let herself be led away to her sister Perjan's house, which was the closest to the scene, where she was given tea and showered with soothing noises of sympathy.

Maryam spent the night there. Kerim routed out Faraj and Ezad and hired a young lad to work full time on the outhouse and the barn walls. He decided on the size of the porch and how it would be supported, and he himself, together with his and Maryam's youngest brother, built a new staircase, much narrower than the old one had been but with real cement holding together the flat rocks. The job was done within two days. Maryam was not entirely happy with the small porch but knew better than to complain. She built herself a new fireplace in one corner, a semicircle of a mud wall some fifteen inches high, which would support the convex iron griddle on

3

About Barrenness and What Tala Did about It

which the flatbreads were baked, and she even built herself a little henhouse with the mud that now was so abundantly heaped up in the courtyard. She had enough grain to feed a few chickens. For the time being she was content. Her brothers were mad at her, just as a father would be angry with a misbehaving child, but she knew that their wives were relieved and that, therefore, their anger would dissipate quickly. She had come so perilously close to losing her porch and her house and, with them, her independence, that now she felt almost elated, looking down over her cucumbers and out towards the street from her quiet perch, her small window to the shrunken world. Listening to the gurgling of her waterpipe, to the faint noises of distant life, she watched the slow hours of the day pass from dusk to sun to shadows, one after the other, lined up like the beads around her neck. As long as God would give her the use of her limbs, a little food for her belly, and enough strength in her bones to move, she would say, "Thanks be to God" a thousand times a day.

Bad luck and ill fate are one's most reliable companions in life, the people say in Deh Koh. Sometimes, bad things happen to bad people, and this is as it should be: God's retribution, just punishment. But much more often things just as bad or worse happen to good people. They just happen according to God's inscrutable design we call life on earth, beyond justice, and are seen as punishment only by the odd neighbor who has a little personal grudge and who argues that no one can really know about the secret sins of others, or of anyone's ancestors (for, like other property, sins too are inheritable).

Of all misfortunes, having no children probably is the most exasperating because it is the most durable. It lasts through one's adulthood and old age, unalterable, unforgettable. Without children one is alone in this world. Without children, it is said, one is nothing, of no importance in the eyes of the people; there is no support to back up one's voice, to watch out for one's advantage, to help, to hustle, to speak up, to take care. Only the cynical will say that without a son one doesn't have to put up with a daughter-in-law, that without a daughter there never will be a dispute with her