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**The warmth of handling**

Biographical note:

Nasrin Mahoutchi is a writer and art practitioner. Nasrin writes in Farsi (Persian) and English languages. Her short stories have been published in journals such as *Heat*, *Southerly* and *Meanjin*. Some of her works has been broadcasted on ABC Radio, *Radio eye*, and on Persian Radio. She is postgraduate student completing her DCA: her creative component is a novel based in Iran and her exegesis is series of essays covering topics of exile and displacement, writing in English as a second language, the private and public, and home.

Sleep still rattled in my child's wet throat when someone knocked on the door. I hid my breast which was engorged and slimy from the child's saliva inside my dress. I ran to open the door. Behind me, the wind stole the child's sleep. The wooden window slammed. The baby cried.

A big, blue-coloured body appeared behind the fly screen. Still, I couldn't completely see the picture behind the door when the person spoke; she was still in shadow.

'Hi. I come from The Salvation Army. I came to give food to your neighbor but nobody seems to be at home. Could you please give this to him later? God bless you.'

Then the Salvation Army woman played with door handle; the door didn't open. I brought the key and opened the door. The smell of cooked carrots rising from the foil tray made me feel sick. When the pink and wrinkled face disappeared, I shut the door.

Upstairs, a cool breeze lulled the baby into sleep again and the old wooden window, while moving on its rusty hinge, seemed to listen to the baby's sleep which still rattled in his throat. Downstairs, I put the foil tray on the kitchen table and wiped the warmth of handling it from my hand with my skirt. Trace of oil diffused inside the cotton flowers on my skirt. I made a coffee and put the cup next to the other coffee cups which were lined up on breakfast table. Ants were moving up and down in the previous unwashed coffee cups.

I took the coffee to my workshop, a big, old pantry connected to the sun room. All four corners of the room had mirrors, two normal mirrors and two concave and convex. Mirrors are good for children's practice, they like miming in front of mirror, rising their arms and acting in front of it. They also love to see their body gets too fat or too thin in the mirror. Before pregnancy I had a plan to organise my own physical theatre workshop for local students. My husband didn't look at my profession seriously although when I asked him to help me to convert the pantry and sunroom to a workshop studio he took time off from his work to help me. I appreciate his help and his lack of understanding of my work. He is a professional nurse. For him, saving life is the major and the most important thing to do; after life being saved: doesn't matter what you do with it. Stretching your body in front of mirrors or miming are not necessary steps in one's life to survive.

Upstairs, I checked the baby; he was asleep. I went to the balcony and checked on Mr. Gorjestani's back yard. In the sunny corner of the backyard Mr. Gorjestani sat with his grey face leaning on a walking stick between his legs. As usual, between his half-open legs, he held his walking stick; his long and grey face lent on his stick; his eyes were staring at an unknown point in the air. He looks like my father. My father was an Azarbayjani too. Sometimes I talk to Mr. Gorjestani in Turkish, although he never talks to me. In his last photo, my father had a walking stick too, leaning on his stick while sitting next to my sister; my sister was pregnant, swollen face and body. She looked very different to the photo she sent six months earlier. In that photo, her husband was beside her: tall, handsome and in army uniform. In one close-up photo,

my father's face has covered the frame; his eyes stare strangely into the camera; it looks cloudy, quiet and sad.

I finished my coffee while watching Mr. Gorjestani. His family had lived in this house for more than fifty five years. My husband's family was the first family who built their house in this street and the next one was Mr. Gorjestani's. He built the house himself. He has been living in this house for fifty years, but still he walked around and looked around as if he was surprised and shocked, lost and scared. His wife died just recently.

In the last few months of my pregnancy, whenever I woke up in the early morning, I sat on the veranda, next to the garden and swung my swollen feet and drank my coffee. Before his wife's death, I could hear the sound of the electric razor which Mr. Gorjestani used in their outside laundry to shave his face. Since his wife died he never shaved his face in the outside laundry. His long, grey beard made him look older. He seemed to be stranger at a destination beyond his reach.

It was such a big house yet, since his wife's death, he was always in his backyard as if he was scared that the walls inside put a spell on him. Once I was walking past his door, I thought I heard his walls talking; it sounded like the humming of mountains; a bursting cry; a storm coming through the walls; whispers of an old house. I thought maybe he was mad.

He wasn't a maniac.

And now, while he was watching me with his unfocussed gaze, he didn't look old any more. His sun-burnt skin and calm face looked childish.

I came closer to him.

Suddenly, the amnesia seemed to leave his eyes and the old man awakened with the smell of my milk. He put out his hands.

I moved my bulging body away from him. Then I heard whispered memories, as if they were dandelion flowers flickered and scattered from his open hand.

He gazed out at the sky again while his hand remained open in the air.

I called his name.

He collected his gaze from the sky. I called him again, hoping he might respond.

From far away, I heard the baby crying. I left the cold foil tray next to him and left.

In the early morning, I hung the washing out, breastfed the baby. In the afternoon, a group of kookaburras were flying and shitting on my washing. I collected the clothes in a plastic basket. I walked through workshop: the convex mirror captured my de-figurative body. In the bathroom, I pushed the washing machine button and ignored my image in the mirror. I breastfed the baby again.

In the afternoon, I checked his backyard. Mr. Gorjestani was sitting on his chair. I took the baby and my coffee and went to the backyard, passing through the workshop. The concave mirror captured our de-figurative bodies.

The sun shone after two days of rain. Under warm weather, the smell of Napisan was evaporating from the nappies. A big pile of dirty nappies had to be washed but I didn't bother to do it. Instead I used the disposable nappies which the Salvation Army woman gave me yesterday. The Salvation Army woman left a foil tray and two packs of XL Toddler Lullaby nappies behind my door. They were not the right size for my baby but using them saved some time. I sat on the other corner of my backyard, opposite Mr. Gorjestani. Behind the bent, old fence my other neighbor's dog was sniffing. Under the raked autumn leaves a group of little ribbed lizards were playing. The rustle of dried leaves made the dog curious. The dog moved his paws and nose inside the broken fence to reach them. My baby got excited too; he jumped up and down on my lap and pulled his hands to catch them or to catch the dog, but each time his hands remained empty and open in the air. The dog barked and the baby laughed and lost his dummy in the corner of the fence, where the dog reached it, through broken fence, sniffed it and bit off the rubber and then let it go. A lizard moved on the shed's wall, went up and down and then stopped there, turned its head towards me, as if checking to see if I still was there. Then it moved its body up and looked down, tapped his tail and remained still for a while; then it ran behind the compost bin. My son was asleep now and felt heavier in my arms. Surprisingly the roaming of an airplane and ice cream van's sound of music didn't wake him up. I put him in the pram.

The next morning I woke up and made a cup of coffee. While I was drinking, the Salvation Army woman knocked on the door. She handed me a foil tray and left. I took the food inside to the kitchen. I took the washing basket upstairs into the bathroom; I passed the washing machine and reached the washbasin where I could see the trace of my husband's life: night shifts, early-morning shaving and leaving the house without cleaning his shaving equipment. Traces of hair and shaving foam were clotted on his safety razor on the green basin. At the corner, next to the washing machine, a pile of his working uniforms stank of sweat and deodorant. I left the bathroom and went to the balcony; my neighbor was sitting in his usual position. I called to him and there was no response. In the kitchen I took the food and went to his backyard. I left the food next to him and heard baby crying. I came back home.

After breastfeeding, I took my baby into my workshop; mirrors played games with us, changing our body shapes into deformed too fat or too thin. He got restless and cried. Although I knew he wasn't hungry, I put my breast in his mouth again. He fed for a little while. I watched the women who were surrounding me: a too-thin one and a too-fat one were breastfeeding too. They were miming me but none of them was me. They didn't see how tired I was. They just stared at me and each time I moved my body they were ready to mime me. After feeding, I held him; patted him. After a while a tepid clot diffused into my shirt and I felt some slimy milk plastered on my hair. Outside, in the living room, the telephone was ringing. By the time I reached the

receiver, a message went on in answering machine. It was my sister's voice. We left the workshop and too-fat-and-too-thin me left the room too.

Someone knocked at the door, but I didn't leave my bed. Last night the baby was sick all night and my husband didn't come back home. I was exhausted. I got out of bed and checked the baby. He was asleep. A big pile of dirty clothes were waiting for me, but I ignored them. In the kitchen I made coffee and went upstairs to the balcony. Under the sunshine I saw snails make tattoos on the wooden arm of the balcony. I sat outside and watched my neighbor's backyard. He wasn't there. I wondered where he could be. Downstairs, I took his foil tray and went to his backyard. A group of kookaburras were playing on the air. I looked at them with anger. Yesterday I had to wash twice because of their shit. I passed his vegetable garden; despite his negligence his vegetable garden looked good. Ripe and red tomatoes smelled fresh; weed sprays were sitting inside a milk crate and a few ladybirds were roaming around a half-built plastic pond. For a while I looked everywhere to find him, but there wasn't any sign of him. I heard a noise from inside the house. I moved towards the veranda door, where his bindweed roses climbed to the second floor. I pushed back two spiders from their webs; the clear strings recoiled on my arm and my face. I cleaned myself and sheepishly opened the door in the veranda.

The dark living room was framed in grey. On a wooden coffee table there was a glass ashtray, and on the table sat a photo of Mr. Gorjestani, his wife and their three sons, in a golden frame. I stopped there as a noise came from the kitchen. I moved my shocked eyes towards the noise. It was the old man, sitting on a chair next to the phone in the same way as he sat outside. He was staring at the phone.

I looked around. On the breakfast table I noticed seven foil trays, untouched. I took a spoon from the kitchen and came close to him, looked at him and then I looked at the phone; I asked him if he wanted to dial any number, but he didn't respond. I noticed the red light was flashing; I pressed the button. A warm male voice on the answering machine said, 'Hi dad congratulations', and then stopped. The tape didn't work. When I played the tape again, he moved his hand to reach me, but again he lost his concentration and gazed at something on the wall. At that point he looked exactly like my father in the photo, where he was holding a baby in a kind of careless way; next to him was my sister, still overweight from pregnancy, one hand on my father's shoulder and the other hand holding baby. Our father was gazing into camera but his gaze wasn't focused and looked fuzzy and cloudy. He wasn't smiling and he looked lost. I played the tape again to see if he would respond. He didn't. On the telephone table there was a bundle of glossy pamphlets, double folded; it was an invitation from a local community centre. It was a night in honour of Mr. and Mrs. Gorjestani for their twenty-years community service for the elderly members of the Azarbayjani migrants. At the bottom of the invitation was: 'Please distribute between your communities'. The bundle had a rubber band around it. I moved closer to feed him. He lost his stick and fell against my chest; the spoon fell off my hand. For a while I remained still and then I took the spoon. His shirt was untidy and open. I could see his grey chest. I fixed his shirt and fastened it with a few baby safety pins. He lost control again and almost fell

down. I pulled his head up and gave him his stick. Far away, the baby was crying. I left the foil tray and the spoon next to him and left.

Upstairs I checked the baby. He was asleep. Downstairs, in the kitchen, I boiled a big pot and put three milk bottles into it. I opened a pack of dummies and put them in the pot too. I set the timer for half an hour. I checked the phone; there were two messages: my husband was working on extra shift and wouldn't be home for dinner and my sister had something to talk about. It was almost twelve at night which meant my sister was sitting in her kitchen at midday and feeding her child. Good time to talk to her.