BITA

FOR A WEEK IT was a nonstop party of drugs and cartoons until an hour ago when I bailed my Auntie Shirin out of the Aspen jail after her arrest for attempted prostitution.

In the white Suburban taxi that bulldozed across the uneven snowy roads, she poked her head out the backseat window, avoiding my questions. Finally, she turned around, her cheeks pink and alive, and yelled in Persian for me to stop meddling: "Foozooli nakon!"

Back at our hotel, Auntie Shirin marched down the third-floor hallway in her five-inch-heel over-the-knee boots. She passed 3E without slowing down. "Not dealing with Houman's kumbaya shit. Bita, my dear, my joon, I'm staying with you."

I hovered the key card over the lock, and my door opened.

Thirty minutes later she walked out of my bathroom wearing a big white hotel robe, and a towel around her head. The steam rolling out the door smelled of sweet chemicals.

Shirin removed the towel and shook out her hair. She lay face down on the king bed, on top of the cloudlike duvet. We'd dubbed my room Club 3M. Me, her son Mo, and all the dipshit kids of our parents' friends. They made mine the party room not because I was

the life of the party but more the opposite—after Mom died last year we'd skipped the trip and could I really get into the spirit without a shove? For eleven years straight, since 1994, our friends and family had flown to Aspen from New York, L.A., and Houston, as if 1979 and the Islamic Revolution hadn't happened. As if we were still the most important families in Iran, descended from the great ancient lines, although this was America and nobody cared. The locals hated us. Not openly, but they did. I imagined them like that Pace Picante commercial, cowboys mumbling "Get a rope" when they saw us in all black, buying a thousand dollars' worth of caviar and champagne at the mom-and-pop market.

"Bita joon, fetch me a Fiji and a Marlboro Light." Auntie Shirin turned her head to the side, her cheek against the white pillow. She raised her arm and pinched at the air. "Be a good girl and do as your auntie says."

"Okay, sure," I said and rolled my eyes.

In Iran, before 1979, Auntie Shirin had chauffeurs and servants. Once she said to me, without an ounce of self-reflection, "Bita, even the chauffeurs talked about overthrowing the king. They drove me to the marches. They hated the Pahlavis nearly as much as me."

Her thick, dark hair splayed out across the white sheets, like ink spilling out on paper. She was a mess and I hated her and I loved her too.

I pulled a cool blue bottle from the minibar and got a cigarette out of the pack in my poofy ski jacket, stuck it in my mouth and lit it on a matchbook from the Caribou Club. The printed gold antlers of the muscular animal rose up in silhouette on the black cardboard. This was the club where my aunt was arrested for attempted prostitution. I inhaled deeply from the cigarette, watching the salt-and-pepper tip turn red, before passing it to Shirin.

"Here you go," I said, blowing out the first smoke.

"Good girl," Auntie Shirin said.

She brought it to her face, her deep maroon nails sparkling. She looked to the bedside table as if to say, Put the water there. So I did.

It was four a.m. and I was no longer high. Or drunk. Just tired and annoyed. I'd bailed Shirin out for ten thousand dollars and all she'd said when the cop brought her barefoot to the empty waiting area was "Thank you, Bita joon" and "I knew you'd answer. What a damn genius I was to call you first, my little lawyer-in-training. That was good practice for you. Houman would be going up the wall."

Then the cop handed me a large plastic bag of her belongings along with her boots, which even he knew better than to stuff in with her purse.

Now on her back, Auntie Shirin lay like a puddle soaking into the ground. The smoke rose from her lips. "Don't you dare knock on his door," she said, meaning her husband passed out in another room along the third floor.

I sat down in the tufted floral armchair next to the bed. On the TV, the newsman stood in a blizzard of white snow, in his black coat, breathing out white air. I pressed mute.

"They treated me like a common criminal. I'm disgusted," Auntie Shirin said and filled her throat again with smoke.

"Did they read you your rights? They search you?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? A horrible slob stuck her hand in my ass. I'm going to sue them, you know."

"Why don't we just focus on getting the charges dropped, Auntie? This isn't a joke—do you want a criminal record? Prison time? These charges can be serious. Think about your business—you're the face of Valiat Events, aren't you?" My voice grew high and slightly shaky.

She widened her eyes, ash building on her cigarette. "Mashallah, Bita," she said. "For an Ivy League law student, you're pretty fucking wimpy."

I looked away at the silent TV, the news always on. It was pretty hypocritical that she invoked allah, given that nobody in our circle actually thought of ourselves as Muslim. Although some ancestor once made the Hajj, circled that big black box and was known for doing so.

"You owe me," I said. "I could have left you shivering on a vinyl mattress until all the Persians came in and roasted you like a marshmallow."

"Attagirl," she said and smiled.

I rolled my eyes. "You're a jerk, Auntie. This is bad, even for you. At least you didn't go through with it. Right?" I pictured Shirin under a big blob of man, giving herself to him. "How did this even happen? Didn't he approach you? I don't get it."

"That pig. That stupid officer fuckface posing as a Dallas playboy," Auntie Shirin said, as she ashed her cigarette onto the floor.

"Do you think they targeted you?"

"For what? Being beautiful?"

I laughed and shook my head. "People from Iran are always a menace. One day we are hostage takers and hairy terrorists, the next we are a nuclear threat or a woman of ill repute."

She stared at me, daring me to continue, but I said nothing.

"He said, 'Baby, be my Cleopatra for the night. I want to be your sheik.' I've had it up to here with that shit. So I said, 'Okay, honey, I can be your Princess Jasmine, but it's gonna cost you. Gimme fifty Gs.' Bastard." Shirin narrowed her eyes, her oily black lashes folding together.

I laughed. "Where did you come up with that amount?"

"I'm worth twice that at least," she said. She stretched her arms out in a yawn, pushing against the headboard with her cigarette hand.

"Watch it," I said. Ash scattered behind her head.

Auntie Shirin dropped her cigarette into the bottle full of water.

"They're so uneducated," she said. "Everyone's a fucking Arab. They don't know anything about the Persians, that we were the greatest civilization on Earth. Let alone that our family in particular is something to behold. So then he said, 'Okay, baby, just walk with me to the ATM.' I'm no idiot. I know an ATM isn't going to give you that kind of money. So I said, 'You're full of shit.' He took out a checkbook and wrote me a check and gave me his entire wallet as collateral. I was going to do it, you know."

"It was a trap," I said. "But you're right. All they saw was woman with dark skin."

"What dark skin?" She looked at one arm and then the other. "No, no."

"Oh please," I said.

"This guy just wanted to humiliate me. He hates beautiful women."

I scanned the dining table. Ketel One, a mirror taken from the wall, rolled-up dollar bills, Gore-Tex gloves, torn-up ski passes with mangled wires, green soy sauce packets and used chopsticks from Sushi Olé. On the carpet, the shiny hard shells of kicked-off ski boots. Black-on-black Prada shopping bags. Half-drunk Fijis, red-lipstick-kissed necks.

"And those opium-smoking dumbasses," Shirin continued. "They won't find out. Let them play their silly games."

She meant the men, like her husband, Houman, and my dad, Teymour, who sat playing cards at their round table covered in green felt brought rolled up in someone's luggage. In their room, the air would smell of mixed smoke—sweet, earthy, and floral, crystal tumblers of scotch shining like stars against the soft, green sky.

"When you were in the shower I called Patty to see if she could help. Her old professor knows some lawyers out in Denver. I told her to be discreet. I know you wouldn't want word to get around."

"I don't need your lawyers, but fine, if you insist, I'll take their call."

"Don't do me any favors, Auntie," I said.

"And who's this Patty? Why would you call her so early in the morning? Shame on you."

"A friend," I said, tipping my head back and staring at the air vent. Gray dust clung to the slats, like petri-dish fur.

THERE WAS A KNOCK at the door. Then, more knocking. I opened my eyes. As I lifted my head, my neck ached.

"Go see who it is," Auntie Shirin said.

I wobbled over to the door, wiping drool from my cheek. Pressed my eye against the cold ring of the peephole.

"It's Mo," I said.

"Don't tell him shit. He can't take it," she said. "But wait." Auntie Shirin reached for the large Ziploc on the floor. Her married name—Shirin Javan—was scrawled on it in black marker. She shook it and junk scattered across the white bed. Matchbooks, makeup cases, phone, black purse. She hurried to refill the purse.

I opened the door. Mo plowed past me, straight to Shirin, whose head was back on the pillow. "The fuck, Mom? Where you been? I've been calling you all morning."

"The fuck what," she said. "Call it female bonding. Show some respect. You don't speak to your mother like that." She propped her purse up on the nightstand.

"Sorry, Mommy," he said. He bent down and kissed her head. He wore all black. His platinum Rolex shone in the bedside light. He was almost thirty, three years older than me. Mo short for Mohammad.

Mo and Shirin had the same beautiful dark moles on their faces, spaced like constellations, jet-black hair, fluid motions. Shirin smiled. Her makeup had stayed on throughout all this—eyeliner drawn slanted like cat eyes, mascara pulling her lashes up and away.

"I'm starved—can we eat?" she said.

Shirin swung her legs onto the floor and untied her robe. It opened up like a curtain and I saw her naked body underneath. She dropped the robe on the bed. I looked at Mo and saw that he was watching her too. Eyes full of love. Her boobs were round and stiff and seemed a separate thing from her body. Her tummy flat and tan, her pussy waxed into a razor-sharp V. Not like someone's fifty-year-old mother. I thought of the cop approaching her, kissing her. The only signs of age were in the veins that stuck out of her hands and neck.

"Can you believe you came out of this?" she said, looking at her crotch. "Best decision I ever made. One day I went to the toilet to take a shit, and there you were."

Mo raised an eyebrow. "Mom, no one else would think this is normal. Be serious."

"I am serious. It's a miracle you're not gay."

Mo laughed.

"Real nice, Auntie. I thought you didn't wanted to seem backwards anymore," I said.

"Talk to me when you have kids, Bita," she said. "No one wants that. My baby boy is a lady-killer." She gave Mo a kiss on his stiff, gelled hair then walked over to the loveseat where she'd dumped last night's clothes. A form-fitting black wool dress and her Chanel boots. No underwear. She put them on. Over it, she put on my black coat with the big fur collar. Her tanned skin shone. "Let's go," she said, smiling and grabbing her purse. "I could eat a cowboy."

As I zipped up my boots I saw the white powder already sliced into lines on the mirror. I leaned over, took the rolled bill, and snorted. Mo and Shirin did the same. I closed my eyes, breathed in and out. The inside of my nose burned and the bitterness leaked down my throat. I swallowed. And there it was throughout my body: the little flash of joy.

We walked out of the hotel room. I checked that the door tag read DO NOT DISTURB. At the elevator bank, a hotel maid was organizing her

cart. Shirin acknowledged her and then, when she turned, snatched a handful of tiny liquor bottles and slipped them into Mo's coat pocket.

The three of us stepped out of the elevator onto the mezzanine carpeted in peach-and-orange paisley. Gold chandeliers lit up the room. A grand wooden staircase rose from the lobby and circled up to where we stood. The après-ski crowd sat on sofas and drank wine, ordering more rounds than they should. In that way they were like us.

We watched the guests down below, fresh off planes in cowboy hats and fur coats. I counted all the bleached blondes and Ken-doll haircuts. Bellboys rushed around with luggage. I spent my infancy on planes. Planes left Tehran daily with our kind, people who could bribe and smuggle their way out.

"When did you realize the Revolution was for real?" I asked my parents once. "Never," Mom said. We were more pro-Shah than we knew. When push came to shove.

"These Texans are making me sick. They're a couple cows and oil wells from being complete dirt," Shirin said. "Let's go have a drink."

We sat before the crackle of the mezzanine lounge fireplace. They'd really done it up this year—more than I remembered. Tinsel reflected in the mirrors. Christmas songs played on invisible speakers. I'd sung them all as a little kid in L.A. I'm sure Mo did, too, in Houston.

American newlyweds sat on the adjacent sofa. They Eskimo-kissed, twirled their wineglasses like they teach you at a wine-tasting class. Then they looked over at us and left. The fire warmed my body.

"Your mom would have loved this," Auntie Shirin said. "Seema was the biggest Christmas freak."

"Was she? She liked the cold air here, the cross-country skiing." *Would have. Was.* The words grated. Fuck cancer, that cheesy saying, and fuck how we distance ourselves from Mom, maybe to protect ourselves from death's entirety, distract us from its lack of a point. She'd been dead just one year and already I felt her fading from us. The little

snow globe she'd treasured as a child—did it hold a pine tree? How can I remember her better? How would a real Muslim do it?

According to one of Mom's rare stories about her youth, my grandmother Elizabeth modeled herself after Hollywood actresses—like Elizabeth Taylor. Even before that Elizabeth's famous visit to Iran in '76, with all the seductive posing in front of landmarks. Our Elizabeth hated children. The children she hated most in the world were her own: her son Nader, my mother Seema, and Auntie Shirin. Elizabeth didn't want to be a mother. She told my mom at sixteen, the day she finally got her first period: "After you came out, bloody and screaming, my life was finished. I was finished." She liked to talk about how much her vagina stretched giving birth. Why wasn't her life over after Nader came out? Nader, a semiliterate bully who ate ants. Was one kid doable, not life-ruining?

"This is the last time I'm doing this dumb trip, kids," Auntie Shirin said, rubbing her shiny, dark nails.

"Why?" Mo said.

"It's more and more of us every year. Aspen is infested with us, and the people of my generation are so boring. The men pretend they're young. And the women act like my old naneh. The monarchy crawled up their asses and died. Roll me a joint, baby." She passed a bejeweled cigarette case to Mo and ordered us a bottle of champagne. I'd thought she was going to say it was no good now without Mom. Maybe she felt that too. I clinked my glass to theirs and then against the edge of the table as my hand wobbled. I waited for something to break. Shirin smoked her joint and nobody stopped her.

"Your fathers," Shirin said, inhaled and exhaled, "are such losers."

"You're so mean," Mo said. "Dad does good business."

"Hah," Shirin said. "In Iran, they *were* the economy." She looked at me. "Houman and your dad are now selling what? Fake Iranian teabags with inspirational messages?"

"Yo, the fake part is not their fault. Hello, sanctions," Mo said.

Suddenly, Shahla, Neda, and Leila appeared in front of us. Sisters I could barely tell apart, Houman's brother's kids. Thick hair blow-dried straight, perfectly arched eyebrows, sad sexy mouths. Like me but, if I'm being honest, much prettier. Black pants, tight sweaters, diamonds, fur earmuffs. Somewhere between ski bunny and Playboy bunny and Iranian Ivanka Trump.

"Oh, girls, sit down. Eat. Eat," Auntie Shirin said. "Looks like all you're on is Ritalin and coffee. I don't understand you girls. You eat, you just eat smart. Lunch, okay. Dinner is for pigs. For dinner you eat a nice salad and that's that."

Shahla, Neda, and Leila giggled and two of them flipped their hair from one side to the other.

"We're going shopping. I need a new dress for tomorrow," the girl on the left said, cocking her head. "Side-boob for real."

"Da-yumn," Mo said. "We got the hottest girls. I'll always say that."

I made a gagging expression, a finger in my mouth. "Incest much? Besides, you only date blondes."

"And you only date Harvard guys? Well, before your dry spell."

"That's different," I said.

"Oh, is it?"

I shook my head. But he was right.

"These Houston boys invited us to a party on Red Mountain," the one in the middle said. "We gotta look fi-yah, yo."

"Hmm. You know anything about these guys?" Mo said.

"Oh, suddenly you're our big bad protector? Shut up, Mo! No one's in it for the conversation. *Blaaah, blaaah, blaaah*," Leila said hoarsely. I knew her by her voice: the oldest, the wisest, the one who'd been passing out drunk on tables since she was eleven.

"LET'S VAMANOS. IT'S FOUR," Auntie Shirin said. "Stores close early today." She put her hand in the air and waved down a waiter. Not even our waiter. "Check?" she said to some guy in a navy uniform. "Don't have all day."

The man rushed back to the bar. I was a little drunk and too tired to act sober, so I stretched out my legs noisily on the coffee table. "No more stealing though," I said. "They charge fifteen dollars for each of those mini bottles. For real, Auntie."

Shirin smiled.

I did like making her smile. "You're such a criminal," I added and watched her now ignore me.

Mo scrunched his brows. "Huh?" he said.

"Joke," I said.

When the waiter didn't return, Auntie Shirin stood up and walked down the stairs and, we could see, out the revolving glass door. She didn't turn back. Mo and I shrugged our shoulders and followed. For a few seconds, I was alone sealed in the glass chamber. The world was quiet. Half gone. Perfect.

Outside, I joined Mo and Shirin under the green awning. I zipped my coat up to my face, feeling jagged metal against my lip, and drew up my hood.

We walked over the melting ice and cobblestone. Cowboy hats bobbing up and down with shopping bags. Everyone buying last-minute Christmas presents, and now so were we. My eyes watered in the cold wind.

Auntie Shirin pressed the buzzer at the entrance of a jewelry store.

"Are we just looking?" I asked.

A security man let us in and then resumed his position inside. He