



MELBOURNE

IT'S A HUMID DECEMBER day and rain clouds are crowding the Melbourne sky. I haven't been able to get Maman's voice out of my head all day. Don't forget to celebrate Shab-e Chelleh, she is saying. You must keep the tradition alive.

On my way to the station after work, I stop at Roshan Supermarket & Halal Meats, the Afghan grocery store in Sunshine, to gather a few things.

Walking around the aisles when your stomach is empty is never a good idea; before long, my basket is overflowing with items I don't need. But I manage to find pomegranates, watermelon and nuts, the customary foods for the winter solstice in Iran. Of course, here in Australia tonight is the summer solstice, but my body and soul are still in sync with the northern hemisphere and its changing seasons.

All day I've been recalling how Maman taught me about Shab-e Chelleh, also known as Yalda. 'It marks the start of forty nights of winter. Christmas and Shab-e Chelleh in fact belong to the same tradition,' she said, explaining that Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ, of light and kindness, while Shab-e Chelleh, the longest night of the year, heralds the birth of the sun and the end of long winter nights. Sometimes she would go even further and say that Christ was only a myth, much to the horror of my aunty Tangerine. According to Maman, the similarity between the two customs illustrated how old traditions were preserved and passed down through the generations, being absorbed into new rituals in order to ensure their survival.

I keep piling things into my basket, so that I end up walking to the station carrying two heavy bags stuffed to maximum capacity; I have to fight off the summer flies by shaking my head from left to right like a cat. When the train pulls up to the platform, I'm relieved to spot two vacant seats. I place my shopping bag on one of the seats to ensure no one will decide to join me and slump into the other seat. The threatened rain has started and I watch the raindrops roll down the windows that separate me from the darkness outside, keeping the outer world at bay and enabling me to dwell a little longer in my thoughts of Maman. After the long day at the office, my stomach is rumbling, and I recall the meals she would make in the colder months: Fesenjan, ash reshteh and ash-e jo. My mother was an amazing cook, so it's hard to choose a favourite dish, but the one I crave most would have to be her Fesenjan, a hearty chicken dish that warms you even when it is

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achingly cold outside. Even now, in the middle of summer, the thought of it evokes Tehran in the depths of winter.

I have vivid memories of arriving home from school at lunchtime to find the house filled with the aroma of smoked rice and pomegranate molasses. I would kick off my shoes, throw down my schoolbag and run into the kitchen with my mouth watering in anticipation of the gravy so rich and sweet and tangy that it seemed capable of melting the snow outside.

I followed Maman around the kitchen from a young age so I know her recipe for Fesenjan by heart; now, on the train, I decide that this will be my dinner tonight.

My head against the window, I drift into sleep dreaming about Maman's cooking, and wake when the conductor taps me on the shoulder at South Geelong station. 'Train terminates here, mate,' he says.

I drive home through heavy rain that angrily lashes my small car. Despite the poor visibility there is a pleasant scent in the air, a mix of paddocks and the salty smell of the bay. Seeing the cows and the sheep grazing is delightful, though I know that before long the trucks will arrive to take them to their unhappy end.

My house is on a street filled with holiday homes, meaning it is sleepy for most of the year, waking up only for the summer months. My neighbour on the left is a quiet man who tinkers with vintage cars, several of which he parks outside my house (just as well I never have any visitors). He has a dog, a German shepherd, so old that she only barks occasionally and rarely moves; it's painful to watch her back legs give way when she tries to walk. Between our two houses is an old lemon-scented gum tree that is

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host to a variety of birds: crows and magpies open the day, while currawongs make the sunset call with a sadness beyond measure. To my right is a pensioner who likes a chat, or a complaint, depending on his mood. For a long time he complained about not having teeth to eat ‘proper food’, but now he has been fitted with false teeth and he hates them. Come to think of it, his conversation mostly consists of complaints. I guess that’s what loneliness does to people. Other than him, the neighbours keep to themselves, which suits me.

When I pull up in front of my house, I see Mr Cat standing behind the sliding glass door, waiting for me. His mouth opens and shuts continuously but I can’t hear anything through the door. As I enter, he winds himself around my legs, almost tripping me on my way to the kitchen.

After I feed him, he turns his back on me and goes to the backyard for his night-time stroll. ‘Fine! Be like that!’ I call out and set about preparing my own dinner.

As I tip the walnuts into the food processor, I remember how Maman would use the grinder attached to our black-and-white Laminex kitchen table. It was a laborious task—something I didn’t appreciate at the time. She made everything look so easy, so effortless.

Once the walnuts have been reduced to a soft and creamy paste, I scrape them into a pot with chopped onions, spices and pomegranate molasses.

Where is the chicken? I can hear Maman asking.

I’m a vegetarian, I would reply.

A little bit of chicken won’t hurt, she’d insist.

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Maman! I'm a vegetarian! It's not about eating a little bit or a lot.

I picture her scrunching her face in dismay. *But without chicken, it's not a proper Fesenjan!*

While the stew bubbles on the stove I sit on the sofa with my phone. I'd received a text message before I left the office that I hadn't yet replied to. It's from Habiba, who has a shop on the ground floor of my building.

Tishtar, please can I see you first thing in the morning?

I reply: *Yes, of course. See you tomorrow.*

I bet it's about that social enterprise idea that she was considering, I say to myself.

I put my phone on the coffee table, turn on the news and stare at the TV. The newsreader's lips move, her facial expression changes, but I don't take in anything except the moving images: footage of people caught in floods in south Asia; bushfires in California; ice melting in Sweden; the last-minute Christmas shopping rush; the stock market report; and the weather—the latter arguably the most interesting part of the program.

I go to the kitchen to check on the stew. The walnuts have released a layer of oil, meaning the dish is ready to serve. I spoon a mound of fluffy basmati rice onto a plate and then ladle two scoops of juicy Fesenjan on top.

I pour a glass of shiraz and sit at the table, but I've lost my appetite. I play with the grains of rice on my plate, pushing them back and forth like chess pieces. My head is saturated with the humanitarian cases I have taken on, people's stories, the tragedies they have lived through. My clients' hopes and dreams rest on my shoulders and I'm worried about letting them down.

My reverie is broken by the ringing of my phone. I look at the caller ID and see that it's my older brother, Satyar, who is in Tehran visiting our parents. Satyar has been living in Austria for decades now. I left Iran more than a decade after Satyar.

Whenever he visits our parents, he makes a video call so that we can all see one another; my parents don't know how to use modern technology.

I accept the call and Satyar's kind face appears on the screen. He has aged so much; his hair is completely grey now and there are wrinkles in the corners of his eyes.

Baba is sitting next to him, and he waves at me. In the background candles are burning, and I can see Maman moving around the room.

'How are you, brother?' Satyar asks.

'I'm okay, merci! What a nice surprise!'

'Well, I thought we'd give you a call so that you can join us on Yalda Night,' he says. 'Surprised you are still up! You haven't forgotten, have you?'

'No, of course not!' I say, trying to sound enthusiastic.

'It's Shab-e Chelleh! You can't go to bed early! It's only five o'clock!' Maman calls out, and she shuffles closer. She has a bowl of mixed nuts in her hands and offers me some. 'Are you all set for the longest night of winter?' she asks with a grin.

'It's actually close to midnight here, the shortest night of summer! Four days before Christmas, in fact,' I say.

'Oh, that doesn't matter,' Maman says. 'Regardless of where you are, you must still celebrate this night. It has a special place

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in our culture.’ She peers at the screen. ‘What’s the weather like over there?’

‘Been raining all evening.’

‘Oh, I love the rain,’ Maman enthuses. ‘Did you know that I named you Tishtar after the god of rain in Persian mythology? He fought Ahriman tirelessly to break the drought and bring rain to dry lands.’

‘Yes, Maman, I did know that.’ Since I was young, Maman has reminded me of the story every time it rained. ‘What’s the weather like there?’ I ask.

‘Ah, you will love this—hold on,’ Satyar says, and he gets up and takes the phone to the window. He opens the curtains and shows me the view. Everything is blanketed in snow.

‘Oh! I miss the snow so much!’ I say.

‘The Alborz mountains are covered in white,’ Satyar says. ‘I will send you a photo later.’

My heart yearns for a sight of the tall mountains that overlook both Tehran and the Caspian Sea region.

He then spins the camera around and shows me the lounge room. Small flames are flickering in all corners of the room. The coffee tables are laden with plates and bowls containing sweets, pomegranate seeds, nuts and watermelon, all the essential elements of Yalda Night, and music is playing softly. Maman’s copy of *Divan-e Hafez*, the collected works of the revered fourteenth-century Persian poet, is sitting on a side table, together with her glasses.

‘What do you think?’ Satyar asks.

‘It’s magical!’ I say. ‘I miss seeing Madar and Auntie Tangerine at the gathering though.’

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'May they rest in peace, both of them, both aunty and your grandma would have been proud to see you succeed on foreign soil,' Baba says. He was the youngest of seven siblings. Aunty Tangerine passed away a few years back, and now Baba is the only one left.

'Yes, amen. Now, show us how you are celebrating Shab-e Chelleh,' Maman says.

I flip my phone camera and show them my small coffee table furnished with one candle, a small bowl of pomegranate seeds on one side and plate of mixed nuts on the other.

'And Hafez?' Maman asks.

I point the camera at the small copy she sent me a few years back.

Now that she has approved my arrangement, we can get to the rituals.

Maman holds her *Divan-e Hafez* close to her heart and asks who wants to seek wisdom from the poet. I tell her I want to know what he has to say about all that has been on my mind.

Maman says a prayer for Hafez's soul then opens the book at random and reads out the verse:

*Last night I dreamed that the angels knocked on the cellar's door.
They made the human clay and sipped on wine.
The heavens could not bear the burden of the trusted gift.
My wandering soul was chosen to fulfil the task.*

'Wow! Very powerful!' Maman says.

'Hmm, what do you think it means?' I ask.

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‘You know, I’ve always believed that you are very special, even before you were born,’ Maman reminds me. ‘And only the chosen ones are trusted with important tasks in life.’

‘And what is his task?’ Satyar interjects.

‘That’s a matter for him to find out,’ Maman says as she kisses the cover of the book and places it gently on the coffee table.

After a cup of tea, Maman repeats the ritual for Satyar, who smirks and plays with his moustache. This annoys her—she takes Hafez very seriously.

We eat pomegranates together and raise our cups of tea, wishing for peace and health.

Soon it is close to midnight and I have to get some sleep, so I say goodbye to my parents and brother and end the call.

I need to silence the thoughts; so much is going on in my head. I look at the dirty dishes piled in the sink. I will deal with them tomorrow, I decide.

I have a hot shower to relax my body, but my muscles have turned into iron. I crawl into my bed.

By 1.30 am, when deep breathing hasn’t achieved much, I get up and fix myself a glass of warm milk with some honey, sure that this will put me to sleep—but no. Around 3 am it occurs to me that fresh air is the solution. The air is very stale in my bedroom; it smells of rice and the burned-out candles. I open the window and the wind rushes in, flattening the lace curtain against my face. It is really dark outside, and I can hear the waves. My house is only two hundred metres or so from Port Phillip Bay. When it storms it is churned up and restless, and tonight is one of those nights; it is not dissimilar to how I feel. The cool change

has arrived after a humid day and the cold westerly wind howls through the cracks of the house, rattling doors and windows. The air outside is so cold the tip of my nose goes numb from standing near the window. It never ceases to amaze me how the temperature can drop by twenty degrees here, and so quickly.

I put my beanie on and go back to bed. I curl up into a ball and shut my eyes. At some point I fall into the land of dreaming, and I hear a familiar voice. ‘Are you coming?’ it says, brushing past my ear like a feather. It is so gentle it seeps into my soul, and a warm feeling washes over me.

Then something touches my face. I lift my head and see the outline of Mr Cat standing next to my pillow, his ears two small triangles sharply set above his head. He looks like a mini Batman, on a mission to fend off the darkness. He is tapping my face with his paw, his pads spongy and cold. Behind him, the gum tree casts shapes and patterns on the curtain; the shadows grow wide and slim, tall and short, as the lace moves around with the wind.

‘Five more minutes,’ I groan. ‘Just five more minutes. Surely it is too early to get up—it must still be the middle of the night!’ I pull the doona over my head, hoping he will leave me alone for a little longer.

A few minutes pass in silence, then Mr Cat plops down next to me and starts purring; I can feel the vibration through the covers. ‘Peace at last,’ I whisper. I reposition myself in the bed and hug my pillow, squeezing it to me.