

AKRAM

Written by

Stacy Thunes

Based on a true story by
Akram Arastehjoo

420 O'Connor Street
Menlo Park, CA 94025

AKRAM

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO BAY - EARLY MORNING

In the glistening moonlight we see FIVE LETTERS floating on the surface of the Bay waters that form the word AKRAM. Then, just as swiftly, the letters lift off and become the Persian mythical bird known as the HUMA, which flies toward a Spanish style home overlooking the Bay.

EXT. SPANISH STYLE HOME - SAME

The Huma weaves through a row of pomegranate trees landing on a feeder and begins pecking at the seeds. At the window we see the silhouette of a woman.

INT. AKRAM'S HOME - SAME

The silhouette is AKRAM, 62, a petite Iranian woman dressed for traveling with a strong, determined face that needs little make-up to convince you of its caliber.

An exquisite Persian rug hangs on the wall behind her, a depiction of Persia's most famous lovers from Samson and Delilah to Rumi and his harem. The rest of the house reflects Akram's elegance: Louis the XIV and European furniture and artifacts situated perfectly around the room.

Akram watches the Huma with sad, brown eyes as it pecks at the seeds in the feeder.

The DOORBELL RINGS. PAUSE. It RINGS again. Then a KNOCK. Akram rouses, goes to the door.

EXT. AKRAM'S HOME - SAME

Akram and a jovial CAB DRIVER come out of the house, the Cabbie carrying Akram's two Louis Vuitton suitcases. They walk on a pathway through a meticulously landscaped garden to the taxi. The Cabbie opens the car door for Akram.

EXT. SAN RAFAEL STREET - SAME

The taxi winds its way down the hill with the Huma close behind ...

FADING INTO:

MONTAGE - IRAN OF THE PAST

-- The Huma as it flies over the Bay that then becomes The Caspian Sea, cast as if directly from a Panjaket wall painting.

-- Then over a map of the Median Empire.

-- Perching, as it watches Men smoking the hookah, propped up on silk pillows, and bejeweled belly dancers moving gracefully. It takes off, resumes its flight...

-- Over the Jamkaran Mosque...

-- And tombs of Omar Khyyam and Farid al-Din Attar in Neyshabur...

-- Fluttering wings turn pages as it passes over Ferdowsi's 'The Shahnameh'...

-- Spellbinding mosaics depicting Persian architecture...

-- Twirling skirts of Sufi dancers...

-- And swooping down over Tehran's Great Bazaar, weaving through the crowds, the food stalls, brilliantly colored scarves, sparkling toe shoes, the smoke of sheesha pipes wafting, finally fading into...

-- A graphic on the wing of an IRAN AIRLINES plane.

-- Now we see several planes and the graphic that is on all the vertical stabilizers of the planes that are taxiing at the Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport...

EXT. TEHRAN IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

We see a British Airways aircraft emerging from between the Iran Air planes.

INT. TEHRAN IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - DAY

Akram comes out of the BA gate with a scarf tied slackly around her head. The other female passengers all wear Western clothing and symbolic scarves.

At the Iranian Air gate, all female passengers wear full chador and/or hijab.

Akram walks quickly through the airport. Large billboards of the Ayatollah Khomeini loom.

EXT. TEHRAN IMAM KHOMEINI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - SAME

A new model Peugeot pulls up at the curb in front of Akram. A Man, neatly dressed, gets out and greets Akram without touching her, takes her bag, opens the passenger for her.

EXT. TEHRAN, IRAN - SAME

The Peugeot lurches through the tree lined streets of Tehran passing Billboards advertising the latest products, the Freedom Tower with Iranian flags blowing in the breeze, tourists dodging weaving cars that pay no attention to traffic laws.

Men and Women (in the company of men) walk the sidewalks, most of the younger women make a feeble attempt at hiding their hair and wearing tight jeans and lots of make-up while the older ones all wear chadors.

A few men in robes and turbans fingering prayer beads are scattered amongst the trendy styles of today.

EXT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - SAME

The Peugeot stops in front of the hospital. Akram gets out and enters, taking a deep breath before she does.

INT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - LOBBY - SAME

Akram enters the lobby. Sparsely decorated, a few pieces of childish looking art hang on the walls.

She approaches the desk, behind which a middle-aged WOMAN in a chador does paperwork.

They exchange a few words, the Woman dials a number, speaks, hangs up. She gestures for Akram to sit.

She does, but seconds later she's up, pacing. She notices a few of the paintings then stops at a watercolor. Streaks of greys and dark blues.

DOCTOR JAFARI approaches, sporting a goatee and glasses.

DOCTOR JAFARI

Mrs. Arastehjoo? Welcome. I am
Doctor Jafari. How was your trip?

Akram forgets herself and takes the doctor's arm.

AKRAM

How is she, Dr. Jafari?

The Doctor looks at Akram's hand. She removes it.

DOCTOR JAFARI

When she admitted herself last week she hadn't left her apartment in 2 months. Now she is at least painting.

Dr. Jafari motions Akram toward a door.

INT. HOSPITAL - CORRIDOR - SAME

Dr. Jafari and Akram walk down the hall. Akram searches the art work on the walls. They stop at a door.

DOCTOR JAFARI

Neda's behavior is very erratic and we are not having the breakthroughs in therapy we should be having. Not only that, but she isn't taking her medication. I'm going to have to release her in a week if she doesn't begin to cooperate.

AKRAM

Thank you, Doctor.

INT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - NEDA'S ROOM - SAME

NEDA, 40, a lovely woman marred by premature lines of worry, wears a drab dress and sits at a window that looks out onto a small balcony, beyond which are vacant basketball and tennis courts, as well as some lonely park benches. An apartment building is in the deserted distance past a chain link fence.

A small, grey bird lands on the railing outside.

Akram tentatively enters the room and closes the door.

AKRAM

Neda?

Neda doesn't turn.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Neda. It's me.

Akram's voice trails off as Neda turns. Akram tries to hide her shock. She goes to Neda and puts her arms around her.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Oh, Neda...

NEDA

Madaar...

Neda breaks down.

AKRAM

It's all right. Everything is going to be fine. I'm here now.

Neda allows herself to be held for another moment.

NEDA

You're here now but how long are you staying? How long, Madaar?

AKRAM

For as long as you need me.

NEDA

Yes, but how long? A day, a month? A lifetime?

AKRAM

Neda...

Neda wipes away the tears, stands, walks around the room.

NEDA

A day or two and then you'll go again? Without me? That's what you do, every time.

AKRAM

Neda, please don't do this to me.

NEDA

Stop doing that!

AKRAM

Doing what?

NEDA

Making this about you. You always make it about you.

AKRAM

But Neda, everything I do is for you.

NEDA

Is this your idea of everything?

AKRAM

It's not my fault you're in this place, Neda.

NEDA

Not your fault? Not your fault. Not your fault...

She goes to Neda, takes her hands, pulls her down on the bed.

AKRAM

Neda, all the women in our family have had struggled in so many ways. You are not the only one. It is somehow the curse of the Iranian woman to struggle.

Neda silently questions Akram.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

But like all of us, we made it out of hell and you can, too, Neda... I know you can...

NEDA

No, I can't do anything and you know that. I'm a failure.

Akram wipes away Neda's tears, then looks out the window beyond the tennis and basketball court, beyond the deserted benches and apartment building, to the great Alborz.

AKRAM

I want to tell you a story, Neda. Some of it you know, but most of it you don't.

The little gray bird is still perched on the railing.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

And maybe at the end of it you will find courage.

THE ALBORZ MOUNTAINS

SUPER: TEHRAN - QAJAR AND PAHLAVI ERAS

AKRAM (V.O.)

It starts with a woman.

SERIES OF SHOTS

-- EXT. GARDEN. DAY - It's Summer and a Persian wedding is taking place. The Bride is a veiled 12 year-old, the Groom, 28, stands at her side.

They, and the entire wedding party, are in front of a Sofreh Aghd. (Traditional Persian wedding spread.)

AKRAM (V.O.)

Who was still a little girl.

-- INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT - The Bride and Groom are in the bedroom on their wedding night. He leads her to the bed.

-- INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT - The Bride is now 14 years old, giving birth on that same bed, surrounded by women. The Midwife puts the baby, MASHALLA, dressed in the traditional white 'dress of resurrection', into her arms. She smiles.

AKRAM (V.O.)

... a little girl surrounded by men and boys.

-- INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT - The Bride is now 16 years old and the same Midwife is at the birth. Another Woman holds a baby, MOJTABA, on her hip.

-- INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT - The Bride is now 18 years old and giving birth with the Midwife again, a boy they name MEHDI. A Woman by the bed holds a baby with one arm and has a toddler by the hand with the other.

AKRAM (V.O.)

Her youth and innocence... taken away. Only one thing remained a constant in her life.

-- INT. BEDROOM. NIGHT - The Bride is now 19 years old and, yes, she is giving birth yet again, this time to MUSTAFA. Birth is now routine.

AKRAM

And that 'constant' effected everyone around them.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

It's winter and heavy snowflakes are dropping.

The Bride, her name BATOOL, is 20 years-old. She is with 2 older Women as well as her sister TUBA, a broad faced, friendly young woman of 17.

They are sitting on cushions around a low table, drying Kafal fish and chopping herbs and vegetables.

Batool's oldest boy Mashalla, 6, stays close to her. He is the golden boy, the fairest of all, with sandy blond hair and blue-green eyes. Mojtaba, 4, and Mehdi, 2, play on the floor inside a makeshift pen while Mustafa, 6 months, is in small wooden crate.

BATOOL

You need to chop more parsley than that, Tuba.

TUBA

How many are we feeding today, Batool? The entire congregation?

BATOOL

Rahim is like a congregation.

Just then the Groom, Rahim, now 35 with an ample midsection, enters. Mashalla, Mojtaba, and Mehdi run to their father. "Baba! Baba!" Rahim lifts Mashalla, kisses him.

INT. BEDROOM - PRE-DAWN

Rahim and Batool are in bed. The sun is beginning to break. Batool opens her eyes, wakes Rahim.

BATOOL

Morning prayers!

The CALL TO PRAYER begins. Batool gets out of bed, cleans herself, Rahim doesn't stir.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Rahim! Rahim.

Batool shakes him. She checks to see if he's breathing. Listens for his heart. Nothing.

Batool runs out of the room.

AKRAM

Tuba!

INT. HOUSE - LATER THAT DAY

Mashalla is standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up, listening to the WAILING from the upstairs bedroom.

Batool comes out of the room wearing all black, followed by Tuba.

BATOOOL
They'll be here any minute...

Batool sees Mashalla.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)
Mashalla, please go and see about
your brothers.

MASHALLA
Madaar, why is everyone crying? Who
will be here any minute?

Batool and Tuba exchange worried glances. Batool runs down the stairs and takes the little boy in her arms.

BATOOOL
Everything is fine, Mashalla-jun.
As long as you and I are together,
everything will be fine. Now run
along.

She goes back upstairs, looking back with a reassuring glance.

Once she and Tuba disappear, Mashalla runs outside without shoes or a coat.

EXT. SIDE OF HOUSE - SAME

Mashalla hides behind some snow covered brush at the side of the house and waits.

A few minutes later he sees a long car pull up to the house. Four Men get out and trample into the house.

A few minutes later, the Men carry a body out followed by Tuba and Batool and two other Women in chadors, crying uncontrollably.

Mashalla recognizes his father.

The body is loaded into the car and the Women return to the house. The car drives off.

MASHALLA
Baba! Baba!

Mashalla runs after the car, tears streaming down his face, then stops and stands when he can no longer catch the car.

EXT. PEZESHK STREET, TEHRAN - DAY

A few houses stand along the dusty street. Batool and Mashalla, now 10, are laying the brick foundations to a house.

The other boys are playing 'Flower, Flower' in the dusty street.

Batool, her strong, youthful beauty marred by a stolen childhood, four births, and a funeral, starts to lift a stack of bricks that are too heavy. Mashalla lifts them for her.

BATOOOL

You've become such a fine young man. I should have called you Sharevar. But God willed your birth when he did, so I called you Mash'Allah instead.

Mashalla smiles up at his mother lovingly.

MASHALLA

I will never leave you, Madaar.

BATOOOL

And we shall make this our castle, our palace, khooneye maa. And you will be its king.

Batool smiles at Mashalla and they continue their back-breaking work.

INT. BATOOOL'S HOUSE - DAY

Batool, her clothes damp from perspiration, is in the kitchen of the now finished home, cooking stew in a huge pot atop a fire pit.

Mashalla, now 13, enters with an empty pot.

MASHALLA

Where is the new one going?

BATOOOL

To Ayatollah Ahmad at the mosque. After that, I have two platters of kebabs ready to go to a birth party at Rahbar.

MASHALLA

I hope you are asking for the right price, Madaar.

BATOOOL

I ask the price you tell me. What I
hope is that they pay it.

They leave the kitchen with that bloody great pot.

EXT. MOSQUE - DAY

Batool and Mashalla are at the mosque with the pot, speaking with the Ayatollah Ahmad. The Ayatollah shakes his head 'NO' then hands Mashalla some money and points Mashalla and Batool in the direction of the back entrance to the mosque.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - SAME

Batool and Mashalla walk down the street without the pot. Batool's stride is resolute, Mashalla is trying to keep up.

BATOOOL

What do they think, this food falls
from the sky? That I can afford,
day in and day out, to give our
provisions away? I need to feed
four hungry mouths, plus mine! I
don't understand what they expect.

MASHALLA

I'll go to work, Madaar.

BATOOOL

No. You will go to school first.

MASHALLA

But...

Batool stops, looks Mashalla earnestly in his eyes.

BATOOOL

No. The Qur'an says: "Whoever fears
Allah, Allah will find a way out
for him from every difficulty and
He will provide for him from
sources that he could never have
imagined." You will go to school
and learn to be a man.

INT. BATOOOL'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Moonlight shines on Batool, her eyes wide open, silently
mouthing a prayer. Mashalla is asleep on a mattress next to
hers.

Mojtaba and the younger boys are asleep on mattresses on the other side of the room.

Batool sits on the edge of her bed and stares at her sleeping prince. She strokes his forehead. A tear falls.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - DAY

Mustafa and the two younger boys wait, looking hungrily at the barberi bread, feta cheese, jam and walnuts laid out.

Batool, Mashalla, and Tuba enter with tea for everyone. The boys are ready to dig in, but when Batool talks, they listen.

BATOOL

I have an announcement to make.

The three boys look up. Mashalla's head hangs.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Last night I didn't sleep. All this work since your father died is too much for me and we will starve if I don't do something. I get paid next to nothing and the only man who understands the hard work I do is Mashalla because he works along side me. I am not complaining because Allah is on our side, but I know of easier ways to make sure we don't die of starvation. And so... I am going to re-marry.

Batool stands and leaves. Silence.

Mashalla storms out of the room leaving Tuba and the others.

EXT. PEZESHK STREET - SAME

Mashalla comes out of the house, looks around.

MASHALLA

Madaar! Madaar!

He sees her walking, her chador dragging in the dirt behind her. Mashalla catches up to her.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

Madaar, you must let me work. I am a clever boy, you don't need to marry anyone, ever. Let me please.

BATOOOL

I refuse to let you throw your
childhood away. Sami is a nice man.
He has money and it is a good
arrangement. Besides, my father
won't have it any other way. I'm
sorry, Mashalla-jun. I am sorry.

INT. BATOOOL'S HOUSE BEDROOM - DAY

Tuba and another female Cousin are in the bedroom fussing
over Batool's hair and clothes, making henna tatoos on her
hands, etc... Her hair has also been died with henna.

Batool is again a bride. She stands with SAMI, 50's, looking
more like a father than a husband.

Several Guests and Batool's four Boys surround The Wedding
Couple to take a photograph. In front of everyone is the
Sophre Aghd. Mashalla and Batool are not smiling.

INT. SAMI'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Its too dark to see much but a large bed in the center of the
room, the moonlight shining on Sami as he leads Batool to it.

INT. SAMI'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Tuba and 2 young Girls, about 12 and 14, are chopping herbs
and vegetables at a table.

TUBA

Batool! How many of the onions do
you want us to chop?

BATOOOL (V.O.)

All of them!

INT. SAMI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - SAME

The house is simple but tasteful, many books line the shelves
and artifacts from the Persia of old are on the tables.

Batool is very pregnant, there's a broom in her hand and she
is cleaning cobwebs from the ceiling, sweeping the floor,
nesting...

BATOOL

Would someone come and move this
sofa for me? And I need the rug
beaten out. Now!

The 2 Girls appear in the doorway, frozen in fear of the
yelling woman.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Don't just stand there! Move that
thing. And then take the rug
outside!

The Girls quickly do as they're told.

Batool sweeps behind the sofa, buckles over, her water's
broken. Without much fuss she calls Tuba.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Tuba! It's time! Get the midwife.

INT. SAMI'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Batool is giving birth surrounded by the Midwife, Tuba, two
other women. The baby arrives. Batool holds out her arms.

INT. SAMI'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - SAME

Mashalla, now 15 and quite the handsome young man, is outside
in the hall, his arm folded across his chest.

Suddenly the bedroom door opens and Tuba peeks her head out.
She sees Mashalla sitting there and smiles wide.

TUBA

It's a girl!!! Finally a girl
graces us. Blessed be the day.

She disappears back into the bedroom. Mashalla doesn't smile.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - DAY

Mashalla and JALIL, a friendly, strong-jawed businessman in
his mid-30's, are standing at a large vacant lot in Tehran.

JALIL

I just bought this whole block,
Mashalla, and I'm going to build
shops and apartments. They will
make me rich. Very rich indeed.

MASHALLA

My uncle says you are a great man.

JALIL

I have great respect for your uncle. And I see great potential in you, Mashalla. I need a young protégé to help me in my business and you have the right qualities. Loyalty, work ethic, ambition. However...

MASHALLA

My mother.

JALIL

Yes. Your mother tells me you are doing very well in school.

MASHALLA

I am. But I am much better suited for work. I want to make money. I want to be rich. Just like you! I need to take care of my mother.

JALIL

Your mother doesn't need taking care of. She remarried. She doesn't need you.

A flicker of anger passes over Mashalla's face.

MASHALLA

She does need me. You don't know. Let me work.

Jalil is moved by the young man's earnestness.

JALIL

Are you willing to start by doing deliveries? I have a truck, maybe one of your brothers would like to assist you? Mehdi, perhaps?

MASHALLA

When do we start?

Jalil shrugs, smiles, extends a hand.

JALIL

Tomorrow? But you have to deal with your mother.

Jalil and Mashalla shake hands.

MASHALLA
My mother will do what I tell her.

EXT. SAMI'S HOUSE - GARDEN - DAY

Batool is outside in the garden, the newborn baby in a wooden crate next to her as she gathers tomatoes in a basket.

Mashalla comes out of the house.

MASHALLA
Madaar?

Batool smiles up at Mashalla and hands him the basket of tomatoes. She begins filling another with something else.

BATTOOL
Here, take this in, would you?

MASHALLA
Madaar. I came out here to talk to you, not fetch vegetables.

Batool continues her work without looking up.

BATTOOL
What do you want to talk about, Mashalla-jun?

MASHALLA
Tomorrow Mehdi and I will start working for Jalil. We will also be moving out of this house and back into our home with Tuba. Hopefully then you will see where your priorities lie.

Now he's caught her attention.

BATTOOL
Mashalla-jun, my priority is and always was with you! It was our decision that you would get an education and I would feed our family! That was our agreement.

MASHALLA
I don't like Sami and I won't spend another minute here.

BATTOOL
But I'll go mad without you.

MASHALLA

Then you will have to go mad,
Madaar. I'll soon be a man and can
decide what I want and what I don't
want and what I want is to be rich
so you will never have to work
again. But if you would rather stay
here, with him...

BATOOL

Why are you doing this to me,
Mashalla? Why?

MASHALLA

Because I love you.

BATOOL

Love. You don't know anything about
love, my son...

The baby starts to stir.

MASHALLA

Maybe not, but I do know that when
father died I became the man of the
house. Just because you married
someone else doesn't mean I am no
longer that man.

BATOOL

I won't live without you.

MASHALLA

Then you will come with us?

Batool takes the baby out of the crate and holds her,
comforts her.

BATOOL

But my baby...

MASHALLA

Are we agreed, Madaar?

Batool looks up at Mashalla with somber, resigned eyes, then
indicates the baby.

BATOOL

You realize ...

MASHALLA

It's his right, yes. And we will
have one less mouth to feed.

Mashalla walks off with the basket. Batool watches Mashalla and a strange look of satisfaction comes over her face.

EXT. SAMI'S HOUSE - DAY

The front door opens and Batool comes out of the house followed by Mashalla, Mojtaba, Mehdi, and Mustafa. Each of the boys carry a suitcase, Mashalla carries two.

Stoic, Batool doesn't turn back as they walk down the street.

In the doorway stands Sami, an old Woman next to him holds the baby in her arms.

INT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Akram and Neda are drinking tea. Neda is staring at her mother.

NEDA

He actually made her give up the baby?

AKRAM

You couldn't make it up, as they say.

NEDA

I don't know, I make things up all the time.

Neda lies on the bed, curling into the fetal position.

NEDA (CONT'D)

Someone told me once that you shouldn't intrude on a good story with the truth.

AKRAM

That may be. But it's an offense to intrude on a great story with a lie.

NEDA

What happened next?

AKRAM

Mojtaba became a carpenter and Mustafa went to school, while Mashalla and Mehdi began making deliveries for Jalil's business.

(MORE)

AKRAM (CONT'D)

One day, Mashalla and Mehdi were in a car accident and Mehdi died three days later.

NEDA

He did?

AKRAM

It devastated Batool but eventually Mashalla made so much money with Jalil that she forgot about everything else and they lived quite comfortably and happily for several years until one day their tiny kingdom came under attack.

TEHRAN - 1940'S

EXT. PEZESHK STREET - DAY

Mojtaba and Mustafa come out of the house wearing work and school clothes, go off in different directions.

Mashalla, now a full grown man wearing a business suit, comes out, Batool behind him. She is now in her early 40's, her heart heavier but her hair still hennaed. She waves.

Mashalla smiles and waves back as he walks toward a house at the other end of the street.

EXT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE - DAY

Mashalla is at the threshold of a home in need of repair. A friendly man in his 50's named SAFAR smiles as he opens the door for Mashalla.

SAFAR

Ah, Mashalla! Come in, come in...
As you can see, your presence is
sorely needed.

He indicates the run-down hallway. Mashalla smiles.

MASHALLA

Well, Mr. Pahlavan, that is what I
am here for.

Just as the two men shake hands, a Woman with a curvaceous figure, lovely long hair, and wearing the latest fashion comes down the stairs. Mashalla's attention is deflected.

SHAMSI, 25, exuding a bright and undeniable sparkle, shyly lowers her eyes as Safar introduces Mashalla to his daughter. The attraction between the two young people is tangible.

SAFAR

Mashalla, this is my daughter,
Shamsi. Shamsi-jun, meet Mashalla.
He's the general contractor I've
hired to renovate our house.

SHAMSI

Hello.

MASHALLA

Shamsi? I think that is the most
beautiful name I have ever heard.

Mashalla is in love.

ANOTHER PERSIAN WEDDING

And another Sofre Ahgd. This time Mashalla and Shamsi are the bride and groom. The perfect couple, love in their eyes and in their hearts. Happy wedding guests surround them, Batool at Mashalla's side... unsmiling.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / MASHALLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is showing signs of more money having been made, as well as Mashalla's penchant for beautiful things.

He enters the room with a tray carrying two cups of tea. Shamsi is highly pregnant, radiating happiness.

MASHALLA

My mother made us some tea.

SHAMSI

Amazing. That's every night this
week.

MASHALLA

Yes, well, she's trying.

Mashalla puts his hand on Shamsi's belly.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

How lovely you look this evening.
How's our little bache?

SHAMSI

He should be here any day now.

MASHALLA

How do you know it's a he?

SHAMSI

A woman knows these things.

MASHALLA

Well, I know things, too. I know
that I love you more than I could
ever love another woman.

Mashalla kisses Shamsi passionately.

EXT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - SAME

Batool is in her nightdress, outside their door, listening.

INT. SHAMSI'S PARENT'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Shamsi is on the bed in the darkened room surrounded by a woman by the name of AMME, 30's, another younger woman, and a MIDWIFE. Shamsi is pushing and breathing, pushing and breathing.

MIDWIFE

Push, Shamsi! You can do it! You
can do it!

Shamsi gives it all she can and the Midwife pulls the baby out, her face quickly fading into one of great shock then sadness. She looks up at all the expectant faces and sadly shakes her head. Shamsi understands, cries.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - DAY

Mashalla, pale and weary, comes downstairs ready for work. He looks on a small table for his keys. They aren't there.

MASHALLA

Damn it! Madaar! Where are my keys?

Batool peeks her head out of the dining area.

BATOOL

I need to talk to you.

MASHALLA

I'm late and I haven't got time for
games.

Batool jingles the keys then retreats into the dining room. Exasperated, Mashalla follows his mother.

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

MASHALLA

What is it?

BATTOOL

That lazy woman you call your wife can't cook, can't clean... she can't do anything.

MASHALLA

Madaar, please give the poor woman some peace. Only one week ago she gave birth to a stillborn child and you already berate her about cleaning? Well done on alienating the woman I love.

BATTOOL

I gave birth to four healthy boys and after every single one of them I went right back to work.

MASHALLA

Madaar, she is not you. Every night she cries when I come home from work. Please have some sympathy for her. I won't spend another minute like this.

BATTOOL

You don't have to. Send her back to her father. She is not the woman for you.

INT. BATTOOL'S HOUSE / MASHALLA'S BEDROOM - SAME

Shamsi is on the bed and can hear their argument through the ceiling.

MASHALLA (V.O.)

I happen to think she is.

BATTOOL (V.O.)

You should have let me choose.

MASHALLA (V.O.)

You don't want me to have any woman at all so that would have made no difference.

BATOOL (V.O.)

I do want you to have a woman! But the woman I choose. A woman who will have healthy sons! That stillborn child was a sign.

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

MASHALLA

A sign of what?

BATOOL

If that woman gets pregnant again, it will be a girl. You must stop your duties as a husband.

MASHALLA

Don't be ridiculous. Shamsi is my wife and we are married. And you've married twice so I know you know what that means.

Mashalla goes for his keys. Batool hides them behind her back.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

You will be the death of me, Madaar. Give me my keys. We will have no more discussions about this. I love Shamsi, she is my wife, and you will be nice to her. Do you understand?

Batool reluctantly hands him the keys. Mashalla goes.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / MASHALLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Shamsi is on the bed. A KNOCK. She opens the door timidly.

BATOOL

You've had enough time to rest. Wash all the linens in the upstairs bedrooms and clean the bathroom. That will be a good enough start.

SHAMSI

I will.

BATOOL
What did you say? Speak up!

SHAMSI
I said I will.

BATOOL
Of course you will because I said
you will.

Batool hesitates, then takes a bit of Shamsi's hair in
between her fingers.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
You are very beautiful. I can see
why my son thinks he loves you.

Shamsi starts to smile but it is short-lived.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
Yet... beauty fades and Mashalla
will soon tire of you unless you
begin acting like a proper wife.

Batool lets go of her hair and walks off.

EXT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - GARDEN - SAME

The sun is shining and Shamsi is out in the garden hanging
bedsheets on the line. Mashalla sneaks up behind her,
startles her. Shamsi squeals in delight.

SHAMSI
Darling. Finally you are home.

Mashalla holds her close.

MASHALLA
So, my dear old mother finally got
you working, did she?

SHAMSI
She hates me, Mashalla. She
absolutely despises me and nothing
I can do or say will change it.

Mashalla watches Shamsi hang the last sheet.

MASHALLA
My mother, well, she's a special
woman. She's been through more than
you and I will ever go through.
(MORE)

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

You know we built this house together, just the two of us? So she's quite possessive of me. But she'll get used to us. Just keep washing the sheets and cleaning the toilets, and you will become her favorite person.

Mashalla smiles at his 'joke'. Shamsi stops and looks at Mashalla.

SHAMSI

I am not sure how well you know your mother. Or yourself.

MASHALLA

Please, darling, don't worry.

SHAMSI

Mashalla, today she told me that you will get tired of me.

MASHALLA

Shamsi, my beautiful princess. How could I tire of the most beautiful woman in the world?

He kisses her.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE KITCHEN - SAME

Batool and Tuba, now in her early 40's, are in the kitchen preparing food.

Moty, 5, Tuba's granddaughter, is in a corner drawing on a piece of paper.

Mustafa comes in the kitchen, kisses his mother, grabs a piece of food off the table, then starts out of the kitchen.

BATOOL

Mustafa!

MUSTAFA

Yes, Madaar?

BATOOL

Will you be home for dinner? Or are you hungry now?

MUSTAFA

I'm not particularly hungry now, no. But I will be home later.

BATTOOL

Then stop eating what isn't cooked!

Mustafa smiles mischievously and leaves the kitchen.

BATTOOL (CONT'D)

She's no good, Tuba.

TUBA

Who? Oh, you mean that lovely creature outside with Mashalla?

Batool gives her a dirty look.

TUBA (CONT'D)

I don't understand what your problem is. She seems like a perfectly fine young woman and comes from a very good family. And besides, they love each other. What more could you wish for?

BATTOOL

It's not love. Look at them.

Batool goes to the window and watches her son and Shamsi being playful with each other. A look of utter disgust comes over her face. Tuba doesn't look.

TUBA

Looks like love to me.

Moty runs over to her grandmother.

MOTY

Maamaan-Bozorg! Look what I drew!

Smiling, she holds up a rudimentary drawing of two lovers holding hands with a black cloud behind them. Moty takes the paper and holds it up.

TUBA

It's very good, Moty.

Tuba smiles at Moty.

TUBA (CONT'D)

Isn't it, Batool?

Batool turns to look.

BATTOOL

Hm.

She turns back to the window.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
I'll have to do something.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / MASHALLA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Shamsi, in a sexy negligee, is on one side of the bed, Mashalla on the other. They are playing 'tag' and Shamsi is 'it'.

MASHALLA
I've got you now, my pet.

Mashalla climbs over the bed and corners Shamsi, she giggles, her face is flushed. He tickles her, she giggles again.

INT. BATOOL'S BEDROOM - SAME

Batool is getting ready for bed. Her ears perk up when she hears Shamsi's GIGGLE. She goes to the wall and presses her ear to it. Another GIGGLE. Batool is furious.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / MASHALLA'S BEDROOM - SAME

Mashalla gently swings Shamsi onto the bed, lies on top of her.

MASHALLA
My God, are you gorgeous. I am the luckiest man alive. Make love with me again!

Shamsi smiles as Mashalla devours her with his eyes.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)
I want to savor this moment forever. Wait! Don't move!

He reaches over to a table by the bed and takes a small, red book out of a drawer. He opens it to a specific page.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)
(reads)
"When you find yourself with the Beloved, embracing for one breath, in that moment you will find your true destiny. Alas, don't spoil this precious moment. Moments like this are very, very rare."

SHAMSI

Rumi.

MASHALLA

He was writing about us.

Mashalla kisses her. He removes a strap from her nighty. Then the other. He is just about to move his mouth to a breast when the door swings open and Batool stands in the threshold, a pillow in her arms.

Mashalla and Shamsi bolt upright, Shamsi trying to cover herself.

BATOOOL

I heard noises. I'll sleep in here tonight. The bed is big enough.

And with that she crawls under the sheets between them. Mashalla sits on the edge of the bed. Shamsi stands on the other side, pulling the straps of her nighty up.

SHAMSI

Mashalla?

MASHALLA

Madaar, this is ridiculous.

Batool shuts her eyes and doesn't budge.

SHAMSI

Mashalla! Do something!

MASHALLA

Madaar, get out of the bed.

Batool is silent. Mashalla looks over at Shamsi then, with a sheepish grin, slowly climbs into bed, leaving Shamsi aghast. Shamsi takes a pillow and leaves the room, looking back at her husband and his mother in bed together. Mashalla opens his eyes briefly but closes them again in shame.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / OFFICE - DAY

Mashalla is doing some paper work. Batool comes in with a duster and starts to clean.

MASHALLA

Did you sleep well, Madaar?

Batool busies herself without looking at her son.

BATOOL
Like a baby.

MASHALLA
Ah, and speaking of which, we're
having another one. You weren't
fast enough with your new sleeping
arrangements.

Batool stops, still not looking at Mashalla.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)
You can't stop love, mother.

Batool resumes her work.

BATOOL
That's not love, Mashalla. It's
infatuation. It's lust. It is not
love.

Mashalla stands and faces his mother.

MASHALLA
You don't know what love is.

This strikes a cord. Batool comes to him, her tiny frame a
match for his robustness.

BATOOL
And now you know all about it
because you got married? Well, I am
telling you it isn't love. Love is
what I have for my first born son.
And because of that love I followed
the commands you gave when you
needed to exercise your manhood.
Now you owe me. That is love.

Mashalla is literally about to pull his hair out.

MASHALLA
But, Madaar! She is the woman I
want to spend the rest of my life
with.

BATOOL
And I am your mother, the woman who
gave you the life you so
desperately yearn to throw away on
that useless girl. There will be
other women. As many as there are
Persian rugs.

(MORE)

BATOOL (CONT'D)
 But right now, you have to choose.
 Divorce Shamsi. Or you will lose me
 forever.

And with that she exits.

INT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL - NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM -
 NIGHT

Neda and Akram are sitting at a small table with half-eaten
 dinners in front of them.

NEDA
 That is absolutely horrible.

Neda gets up, paces, rubs her temples.

NEDA (CONT'D)
 I've got such a headache. I don't
 understand how she could have done
 that to them.

Neda sits on the edge of the bed and takes the pills that are
 in a little cup on the table.

NEDA (CONT'D)
 I need a rest.

AKRAM
 Shall I come back in the morning?

Akram stands, strokes Neda who looks up with tears in her
 eyes.

NEDA
 Madaar... Would you call the boys
 at their father's and tell them I
 love them?

AKRAM
 Of course.

Akram gives Neda a kiss on the forehead then leaves.

Neda sits down on the bed and looks at the tiny grey bird on
 the railing.

Neda goes to the table and tears off a small piece of bread,
 takes it to the window, and sets it down on the railing
 for the bird. She watches as the bird pecks at the bread.

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - THE NEXT DAY

The sun is shining, Akram is brushing Neda's hair.

AKRAM

I loved brushing your hair when you were little. So lovely and straight. Much nicer than the wild curls I had when I was that age. Of course now I'd kill to have those curls back.

Neda smiles.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Are you ready to hear more of the story?

NEDA

Only if you tell me Mashalla told Batool to go to hell so he and Shamsi could live happily ever after.

AKRAM

I wish I could.

Akram puts the brush down.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Come, let's take a little stroll.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

Akram and Neda are on the hospital grounds, arm in arm.

AKRAM

It was the middle of winter...

EXT. PEZESHK STREET - DAY

AKRAM (V.O.)

...Batool had gotten her way...

Amidst the falling snow, Batool, in a black chador and carrying a small blanket, comes out of her house.

AKRAM (V.O.)

And she was just about to get her way again.

Batool walks determinately to the other end of the street, her tiny feet leaving dots in the snow and her steamy breath blasting in and out like an angry bull's.

EXT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE DOORWAY - SAME

Batool, dwarfed by the doorway, raps impatiently on the door.

From inside the house we HEAR the CRIES of a woman in labor.

The door swings open with a Maid in the threshold. Batool waits for her to step aside. The Maid folds her arms.

BATOOL
Don't be a fool.

Batool pushes the chador off her head and impales the Maid with piercing eyes, proud cheekbones, a gaunt, striking face.

The Maid looks down and moves, Batool strides into the house.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE HALLWAY - SAME

The CRIES become louder as Batool passes the kitchen where we see SAFAR, 40's, looks out the window, his hands clenched behind his back. He barely acknowledges Batool's presence.

INT. SHAMSI'S BEDROOM - SAME

Batool stops in the doorway of the dimly lit bedroom where Shamsi is again giving birth.

2 women stand at the bed, the Midwife, and Amme.

Shamsi's dark hair sticks with sweat to her forehead contrasting the alabaster skin, which is even paler as she pushes and pants, straining to deliver her baby.

Shamsi grips the Midwife's hand as Amme strokes her forehead.

Shamsi's large eyes widen abruptly in terror as she discovers Batool in the doorway. She grabs Amme's hand, pulling her down towards her.

SHAMSI
Amme! NO! You mustn't let her. Tell
her to leave, tell her to go!

Amme throws Batool a resentful glance.

AMME

Ssh, Shamsi. Don't excite yourself.

Batool stands, expressionless, in the doorway, the folded blanket in her hands.

SHAMSI

But you can't let her! Promise me
you won't let her. She's taken
everything else, she can't take my
baby!

MIDWIFE

Now! Push! Keep pushing!

Shamsi lets out one more heart-wrenching cry, pushing with all her strength, gripping Amme's hand. Finally the baby is born, it cries. The Midwife smiles.

MIDWIFE (CONT'D)

It's a girl! Blessed be her
arrival! Ghadamesh mobarak!

Relief. Shamsi smiles and laughs through the pain and the tears.

The Midwife cuts the umbilical cord and begins to release the baby into Shamsi's open arms, when suddenly a claw-like hand clutches the Midwife's and seizes the child from her.

SHAMSI

No! I beg of you! My little girl!

Amme tries to calm Shamsi but she pushes her away, trying to get out of bed. The BABY WAILS, its face red and furious.

Batool, unmoved, calmly wraps the naked child in the blanket.

Batool leaves the room, ignoring the tiny knitted baby clothes on the dresser.

With the baby swaddled in the woolen blanket, Batool's black chador sweeps behind her as Shamsi's SCREAMING ...

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Nooooo! Batooooool!

... FOLLOWS the old woman out of the bedroom ...

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE HALLWAY - SAME

... down the hallway...

EXT. PEZESHK STREET, TEHRAN - SAME

... and out into the thickening snow storm.

The SCREAMS...

FADE INTO:

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - DAY

Batool and Tuba are trying various ways to calm the CRYING Baby, but she is interested in only one thing.

TUBA

I told you not to do this, Batool.
The baby needs her mother.

BATOOL

Agnes didn't have her mother and
she survived. This one will, too.

TUBA

And what will you tell her later?

BATOOL

If she ever asks, I will tell her
that her mother died at childbirth.

With calm desperation, Batool takes out a withered breast and directs it to the baby's mouth.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Sshh...

TUBA

Now I know you've lost your mind.

Silence as the baby hungrily suckles Batool's breast. Batool looks at Tuba triumphantly.

A few moments later the Baby realizes nothing is coming out. She CRIES OUT again.

TUBA (CONT'D)

What a surprise.

Impatiently, Batool covers herself up. Mustafa comes into the living room.

MUSTAFA

Madaar, what is going on? I'm
trying to study upstairs and all I
can hear is that screaming baby!

BATOOL
I am trying to calm her.

MUSTAFA
I'm going to Heydar's, it's quiet
there.

Mustafa leaves.

BATOOL
Where's Moty?

TUBA
Why Moty? You think she'll be any
better at it?

BATOOL
(yelling)
Moty! Bia enja!

TUBA
What do you want with Moty, Batool?

BATOOL
Didn't Naseem across the road just
have a baby? And I believe Saman
next door did as well.

TUBA
What makes you think...?

Moty, now 6, skips into the room and stops at the doorway.
She smiles, as she is frequently known to do.

MOTY
Hi!

Batool and Tuba look over at Moty.

EXT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - SAME

Moty appears from Mashalla's house carrying two empty glass
bottles.

She walks along the street, smiling, greeting Neighbors,
purposefully avoiding wet snow puddles.

Moty arrives at a house and knocks on the door.

EXT. YOUNG MOTHER'S HOUSE - SAME

A YOUNG MOTHER, wearing the latest 60's fashions, opens the door with a baby in her arms. She smiles, Moty enters.

INT. YOUNG MOTHER'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - SAME

Two Old Women in black chadors sit at another table chopping vegetables as if they'd been doing nothing else their whole lives. They eye Moty.

Through the door we see the Young Mother pumping her breast milk into one of Moty's bottles.

Moty sits at a small table in the kitchen, one of the milk bottles in front of her, trying not to look at the old ladies as her legs swing back and forth on the too tall chair.

The Young Mother reappears with an almost full bottle.

YOUNG MOTHER

Here you go, Moty. And be careful
with that, it's slippery outside.

Moty nods, takes the bottle, gives a small bow, and leaves the kitchen.

The Older Women shake their heads disapprovingly.

YOUNG MOTHER (CONT'D)

It's an absolute crime. That woman
will get hers someday.

OLD WOMAN

A woman that disgraceful will never
find solace.

EXT. PEZESHK STREET - SAME

Moty exits the house, crosses the street, knocks on the door of another house. The door opens, Moty enter.

EXT. PEZESHK STREET - SAME

Moty exits with the second bottle almost full of milk. She walks down the street, whistling and balancing on the curb.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE - SAME

Batool, pacing with the baby in her arms, HEARS the DOOR open.

BATOOOL
Praise Allah!

Moty comes smiling around the corner with the two milk bottles and stops in the doorway. She's dragged a bit of snow in with her.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)
What have you done?!

TUBA
Batool, it's just a little snow.

BATOOOL
Give me one of those! And put the other one on the ledge outside for the time being.

TUBA
Let me put the nipple on first!
Moty, go and change your clothes.

BATOOOL
And clean up that snow! If mother of hers had done a better job...

TUBA
Don't you say a word about my daughter. She did her best with Moty, may Allah rest her soul in peace.

Moty and Tuba go off, Batool bounces the baby.

Tuba comes back with some rags, drops them on the floor out in the hall, and brings in the bottle with a nipple on it.

BATOOOL
Finally!

Batool walks around the living room with the baby in her arms, feeding her. Tuba and Moty wipe up the snow.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)
There you are, little angel. Look how sweet she is! Look at that mouth, like a rosebud. What should we call her, Tuba?
(MORE)

BATOOL (CONT'D)

She looks like one of the thousand
faces of God when she's suckling
like this.

Tuba looks at Batool sideways.

TUBA

All children look like that when
they're quiet.

Batool ignores her remark.

BATOOL

You know the quote, Tuba? From the
Qu'ran? "Allah, the most generous
one, who taught humanity what they
did not know." That is what we
shall call her: Akram, the Most
Generous One. Do you like it?
Akram. (beat) Akram.

TUBA

That's an Arab name. She's not
going to like it when she grows up.

BATOOL

God has a thousand names as well
faces. It has deep meaning.

TUBA

I still don't think she'll like it.
In fact, I don't think she's going
to like any of this.

BATOOL

If I want your advice Tuba, I'll
ask for it.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE / BEDROOM - DAY

Shamsi is sitting on the edge of her bed, retrieving milk
from her breast with a glass pump. Her eyes are moist from
crying.

She dumps the milk down the drain of the little sink in her
room then stares outside.

There's a KNOCK on her door. Another KNOCK. The door opens a
crack. Safar pokes his head in.

SHAMSI'S FATHER

Shamsi jun?

She doesn't react.

SAFAR
Shamsi, please come and eat
something.

Silence.

SAFAR (CONT'D)
Amme is here, she made a kuku
sabzi.

SHAMSI
I'm not hungry.

SAFAR
But you have to eat. You need your
strength.

SHAMSI
I don't want anything but my baby.

SAFAR
Shamsi jun! You will eat.

She turns to him.

SAFAR (CONT'D)
And I will see you downstairs in
five minutes.

Safar closes the door and her eyes fill with tears.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - SAME

Batool is cleaning the house, flitting about, dusting,
polishing, etc.

Baby Akram is asleep in the old wooden crate that doubles as
a crib. It is next to MASHALLA, 30's, as handsome as he is
pampered, asleep around the 'corsi', an inside fire pit that
is protected by a blanketed covering.

Batool strokes Mashalla's cheek, smiles.

BATOOL
And now our family is complete...

Baby Akram stirs. Batool lifts the crate and starts to leave
the living room with it.

BATTOOL (CONT'D)
Ssh, you don't want to wake your
baba! He's sleeping so peacefully.

MASHALLA
Madaar.

Batool turns to Mashalla, who is now starting to wake.

BATTOOL
Did you have a good nap?

MASHALLA
Mhm. Let me see the child.

Batool walks over to Mashalla and puts the crate back down on the floor. The Baby coos up at him. He smiles at her.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)
You're going to call her Akram?

BATTOOL
Do you like it, Mashalla?

He reaches down with a finger to stroke the baby's cheek.

MASHALLA
Akram. I do. I like it.

Mashalla stands.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)
I've had a long sleep. I'm going
out.

She starts to follow him out.

BATTOOL
No lunch? Will you be home for
dinner? We are making your
favorite.

Mashalla leaves without looking at her.

MASHALLA
I have a business appointment.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - SAME

Shamsi enters the kitchen. She has aged and her eyes have lost their sparkle.

There are Persian foods laid out on the table. Safar sits on a cushion on the floor, reading a newspaper. He looks up, smiles. Shamsi sits.

Amme comes in from the back part of the cooking area with kuku and doles out the food.

AMME

I made your favorite. Here, eat.

Shamsi takes her fork, shifts her food around the plate. Silence. Amme and Safar chew slowly, exchange looks.

Shamsi looks at her father.

SHAMSI

Father, can you talk to Mashalla?

Safar shakes his head no.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

He will listen to you! He always liked you.

SAFAR

Shamsi jun, you know there is nothing I can do. You must let it go.

SHAMSI

But Naseem told me about a law that says if it's a girl...

SAFAR

Mashalla divorced you and it is his decision to make. Just as it is his decision to keep the child, no matter what the gender.

SHAMSI

It wasn't his decision and everyone knows it.

AMME

May the devil own that woman...

SAFAR

Mashalla is the baby's father and she belongs to him. There is nothing I, or anyone else can do.

SHAMSI

It's not fair. I don't even know what her name is.

SAFAR

Life is not fair. Whoever told you
it was is a liar. You will meet
someone else, Shamsi, and then you
will have another child and you can
give it a thousand names if you
want.

Shamsi runs out of the kitchen. We hear her FOOTSTEPS running
up the stairs and her bedroom door SLAM shut.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE / BEDROOM - SAME

Shamsi runs into her room and slams the door. She crouches
under the bed and retrieves a box, empties it out on the bed.

She spreads out the contents: Dried flowers, a necklace and
other jewelry, the red book of Rumi poems, and love notes...
dozens of love notes...

Shamsi takes the Rumi book and rips the pages out.

She picks up one letter ...

"Darling, I am counting the days until I meet you again. Your
lover, Mashalla."

... then rips it into tiny pieces...

"I now know that I will never be able to spend a moment
without you. Your lover, Mashalla..." "

She crumples this one into a ball and tosses it on the floor.

"Meet me again tonight at our secret place... Your lover,
Mashalla..."

Shamsi shoves everything off the bed with force, tears
streaming down her face, then runs out of the room.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE KITCHEN - DAY

Batool, two FEMALE COUSINS in their 30's and 40's, and Tuba,
are in the kitchen helping with lunch.

Various male and female child cousins run in and out of the
kitchen, playing, among them Moty.

The Women are washing, chopping, and mixing various
vegetables and herbs as Batool flits around, giving orders,
cleaning cobwebs, or retrieving ingredients from the shelf
that hangs just outside the window as refrigeration.

Batool disappears into the hall and comes back, dragging the Baby, who is sleeping peacefully in her crate.

Suddenly there's a loud KNOCK at the door.

EXT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - SAME

Shamsi is barefoot, in her house dress, pounding on the door. Safar is running down the street after her.

SAFAR

Shamsi! What are you doing? You're mad!

Shamsi continues to beat down the door.

SHAMSI

Batool! Open this door! I want my baby!

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - SAME

Mustafa runs down the stairs as Batool and Tuba come out of the kitchen, Moty behind Tuba. The POUNDING continues as Shamsi yells through the door.

SHAMSI (V.O.)

Please let me have my baby! Please!

MUSTAFA

Madaar! Why don't you just give the poor woman...

BATOOL

Be quiet! If I open the door now, she will never stop coming. Go back to what you were doing, she will leave eventually.

SHAMSI (V.O.)

Batool! Batool!

TUBA

Sister... you must let her see that child. You should understand her pain as much as anyone...

BATOOL

Did I ask you for your advice?

More POUNDING and YELLING coming from outside.

TUBA

I am pleading with you, Batool! She is a woman scorned and will bring disgrace upon everyone she meets if you don't do something for her! Have a heart.

BATTOOL

If she marries again I will let her. Not before.

Batool goes back into the kitchen as Mustafa, Moty, and Tuba stand there, dumbfounded.

EXT. BATTOOL'S HOUSE - SAME

Shamsi's Father pulls Shamsi away from the doorstep.

SHAMSI

My baby! Batool! Please!

He drags her away by the arm to their house at the other end of the street, talking to the neighbors hanging out of their windows, watching the spectacle.

SAFAR

You can all go back inside now. The show is over! Go on!

A woman closes her window, shaking her head in sympathy.

FADE INTO:

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Neda is standing at the window, now wearing a nice dress.

NEDA

If you're telling this story to make me feel better, it's not working.

AKRAM

Well, if it's any consolation, Tuba knew my name wouldn't be the only thing I didn't like.

NEDA

Tuba is becoming my favorite person in all of this.

AKRAM

Yes, she was a courageous woman.
Moty and I became very close, too.
She helped me out of more than a
few messes.

NEDA

Did Shamsi... my grandmother...
ever see you as a baby?

AKRAM

She tried, many times, but it
always ended the same. Until one
day...

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / HALLWAY - DAY

More signs of Mashalla and his household becoming wealthier
and wealthier.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - MUSTAFA'S BEDROOM - SAME

Mustafa and Akram are having a nap upstairs.

Suddenly there's a LOUD POUNDING on the door, then YELLING.
Mustafa starts, wake, Akram begins to cry.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / HALLWAY

POUNDING...

SHAMSI (O.S.)

Batool! Open this door!

Batool comes out from the kitchen, furious.

SHAMSI (O.S.) (CONT'D)

I demand to see her! Open the door!

She stands at the door, Tuba runs after her.

BATOOL

Go away!

TUBA

Batool, please, just this once.

Batool looks at Tuba like she's crazy.

BATOOL
I will do one thing and that is
tell her to her face.

Batool jerks open the door.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
You will not see her, do you
understand? Unless you come to us
as a married woman you will not see
her, ever.

SHAMSI
Do you think that is going to work?
You think I'm going to let my baby
go, just like that? You're crazy.
You're a crazy old lady.

BATOOL
I am not old.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - MUSTAFA'S BEDROOM

Mustafa hears the YELLING.

MUSTAFA
That's it!

He grabs Akram under the arms and runs out of the room with
her.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - HALLWAY

Mustafa comes out of the room and throws Akram down the
stairs.

MUSTAFA
Take her! Just take Akram and be
done with it! You're driving all of
us out of our heads.

Batool is forced out of the way by the child that lands with
a thump at Batool's feet. Shamsi reacts fast and picks up the
screaming child, comforting her immediately.

BATOOL
Mustafa! Have you gone crazy?!
She's mine. That child is
rightfully mine. Shamsi, give me
back that baby.

Batool grabs Akram's arm and starts to pull her back. It's chaos for a moment as the women fight over the 18 month-old child, with Tuba yelling for them all to let go and Mustafa trying to separate Shamsi and Akram from Batool's grip.

Tuba finally gets their attention.

TUBA

In the name of Allah, stop it, now,
both of you!

Suddenly Shamsi stops and realizes what they've been doing.

She gently pushes Akram into Batool's arms and looks down at her own hands in shock. Batool takes Akram and looks the child over for any injuries.

Shamsi looks up at Mustafa who is now sitting on one of the steps, his head in his hands.

SHAMSI

I will not fight over a child.

Tuba wants to reach out to the poor woman but Shamsi is gone. Tuba closes the door. Batool seethes, looks over at Mustafa.

BATOOOL

Have you gone mad, Mustafa? What
were you thinking?

TUBA

He was thinking what all of us have
been thinking, Sister.

Tuba goes back into the kitchen. Batool follows.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE KITCHEN - SAME

Tuba goes back to her chopping as Batool, with a teary Akram in her arms, enters.

BATOOOL

If you don't like the way I run my
household, sister, the front door
is not locked.

Tuba stops her chopping. She looks up at Batool, then lays down the knife, wipes her hands.

TUBA

If I go, I will never come back,
which is why I am staying. You will
always do what you've always done.

Tuba takes little Akram's tear-streamed face in her hands and kisses her.

TUBA (CONT'D)
May Allah protect you. Always.

Akram throws her arms around Batool's neck and buries her head in her shoulder.

FADE INTO:

SERIES OF SHOTS - TEHRAN OF THE 1950'S

-- Men and Women wearing the latest fashions, only a few men wearing the robes of an Imam or the women in chador and hijab.

-- Men and Women walking together on the street...

-- Men and Women sitting together in cafe's drinking wine, smoking cigarettes...

-- Happy Families in a park...

EXT. BAGH-E-SABA REGION OF NORTH TEHRAN - DAY

Pretty stone houses with large, almost farm-like gardens make up this Northern Tehran suburb.

EXT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / GARDEN - DAY

A beautiful two-storey, stone house surrounded by a wall cascading with roses and jasmine. A fountain is in the center. The snow capped Alborz mountains in the distance. Unadulterated idyll.

AKRAM (V.O.)
For a while my childhood was
paradise. There was always
something to do, somewhere to go,
someone to play with, and something
wonderful to eat. Until the harsh
realities of those things that had
happened before became apparent.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - SAME

A large, sunny, expensively decorated room. The windows and French doors are open, stone steps lead down to the garden.

The SOUNDS of life in the house come from all corners: Birds are chirping, pots and pans are shuffling, lively Persian music is playing.

Suddenly Akram, 6, followed by Moty, 11, come running down the stairs and out the French doors to the garden.

MOTY

I'm gonna get you!

AKRAM

No you won't cause I'm faster than you! Moty, the slow poke! Moty the slow poke!

EXT. GARDEN - SAME

Akram swiftly climbs up to the second branch of the walnut tree and perches where Moty can't get to her. Out of breath, smiling, Akram cracks a walnut open.

AKRAM

See? I told you! You can't get me!

The little girl smiles with delight, her mischievous eyes peeking out from a halo of unruly curls.

Moty jumps up several times to grab onto Akram's leg, but Akram swings it out of Moty's grasp every time.

MOTY

Akram!

Akram drops a little stone onto Moty's head and giggles so hard she almost falls out of the tree.

MOTY (CONT'D)

Hey! Come down here, you little monkey!

AKRAM

You come up!

Akram slides down to the branch below, scratching her arm in the process. Moty climbs up the tree carefully, so as not to mess up her skirt. Akram hands Moty part of a walnut.

MOTY

Hey! You're bleeding!

Akram looks at the scratch on her arm and wipes the blood away with a stroke.

AKRAM

Big deal!

Now four legs swing back and forth as the girls munch walnuts. The luscious garden sweeps out in front of them.

Akram looks over at Moty's hair, long and sleek, pulled back by a bejeweled hair clip.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Moty, why don't I have long hair like you?

Moty shrugs.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

But why?

MOTY

Oh, brother... I've told you a million times already!

Moty takes some of Akram's hair between her finger and pulls.

MOTY (CONT'D)

Your hair is long when I pull on it... like this! It's just curly.

Akram folds her arms in front of her chest.

AKRAM

Well I don't like it. I want hair like you.

MOTY

I think it's good you have curly hair. Know why?

AKRAM

No. Why?

MOTY

Because it doesn't get all messy when you fall in the mud or climb trees or wrestle with your cousins!

AKRAM

Oh yeah?

Suddenly Akram grabs the comb out of Moty's hair and jumps off the tree with it.

MOTY

Hey! Give that back!

Akram runs into the house. Moty, with slight difficulty, gets off the branch and follows Akram.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - SAME

Akram runs into the arms of Batool, now in her early 50's, her hair still henna red and wearing a simple dress. She is preparing to fry some fish next to a huge plate of Lavashak that she has just finished making.

AKRAM

Mommy! Mommy!

Akram hides the comb behind her back and stands in front of Batool, her little hips wiggling.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Moty says I fall in the mud!

Batool laughs.

BATOOOL

But you do!

Moty runs in, out of breath.

MOTY

Tell her to give it back, Auntie!
She'll break it! It's my
favorite...

BATOOOL

Akram. Give Moty her comb.

Akram reluctantly gives Moty her comb while crossing her legs over each other, back and forth. Moty puts the comb back in her hair.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)

What is it? Do you need to pee?

Akram shakes her curly head no. But the urine has begun to flow. Batool picks her up and runs to the bathroom with her.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)

Why, oh why, do you always wait
until the last minute!

A stream of urine trickles out over the marble floor.

INT. BATHROOM

Akram is on the toilet, Batool kneels in front of her, cleaning her up, changing her clothes.

BATOOOL
How many times do I have to tell
you? Stop playing when you need to
go pee!

Akram throws her arms around Batool's neck.

AKRAM
OK, mommy, OK!

She kisses Batool all over her face, Batool melts but quickly finds 'herself' again.

BATOOOL
Now go with Moty to fetch some
milk. When you get back, you can
have some Lavashak.

Akram bolts out of the bathroom calling...

AKRAM
MOTY!

SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. FIELD - DAY

Moty and Akram are running across a field, Moty carrying a milk bucket. They come to a low fence surrounding a large garden/animal pen. Moty opens the gate while Akram climbs over the fence.

There's a house just beyond the grazing cows, goats, and turkeys. The animals come and greet the girls as they make their way to small barn.

A Man in farming clothes approaches, smiles, leads them to where a cow is being milked by a 12 year-old Boy. The Man takes the pail from Moty and puts it beneath the udder. The girls watch.

The Man hands the pail back to Moty, Akram gives the Man some coins. Moty and Akram wave goodbye, then head off the way they came.

EXT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / GARDEN - SAME

Akram and Moty enter the garden and up the steps. Batool greets them at the door and Moty gives her the milk. Batool disappears inside and brings out the platter of pomegranates.

Moty and Akram devour the Lavashak. 3 male Cousins, ages 7, 9, and 11, appear at the back gate. Akram stands, smiles, waves them in. They eating, then the children begin playing games of wrestles, laughter, chasing, and hiding.

Batool watches from the top of the stairs, shaking her head with a wry smile.

BACK TO SCENE

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / BATOOL'S BEDROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Batool is at the sink, washing for the afternoon 'Asr' prayer, Akram next to her, mimicking her movements, splashes of dirt cover her face.

When Batool is finished she tries to dress Akram in a mini-chador but Akram is having none of it.

AKRAM

No! No! No! I don't want to! I won't wear it!

BATOOL

You will!

AKRAM

No, Mommy! I don't like it. It's too hot and I won't wear it. I'll tell Baba!

BATOOL

I don't care what you tell Baba. You will do as I say! Otherwise there will be no visit to Uncle's, or playing with Azam and your cousins, or anything else. Do you hear me?

AKRAM

But Mommy!

Akram decides to do what Batool says. She sticks out her lower lip, raises her arms for Batool to put the chador on, and looks utterly ridiculous in it.

Batool starts her prayers, bowing up and down on the rug. Akram is at her side, again mimicking Batool's movements, only this time she looks like a mini, goofy-Jane Fonda.

Akram tires of her gymnastics and sits on the bed, crossing her arms and legs, contemplating while watching Batool go through her religious machinations. Suddenly she blurts out:

AKRAM (CONT'D)

How can you be my mother when Baba calls you mother, too?

Batool bolts upright.

BATOOOL

What?

AKRAM

How can you be my mother...

BATOOOL

I heard you. Who have you been talking to? Moty?

Akram shakes her head 'no'.

AKRAM

If you're Baba's mother and you're Uncle's mother, then how can you be my mother?

BATOOOL

I am everyone's mother.

AKRAM

I don't want you to be everyone's mother. I want you to be my mother!

Akram jumps on Batool's back who impatiently shoves her off.

BATOOOL

Akram! Stop this foolishness. Go find Moty and get ready for lunch. And then we will go to Uncle's.

AKRAM

I heard that you aren't my mother at all!

BATOOOL

Who told you that?

Batool stops her prayers once again. Akram crosses her arms and juts out that lower lip.

AKRAM

You did.

Batool looks at Akram as if she's lost her mind, then remembers something.

FADE INTO:

BATTOOL'S MEMORY

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / HALLWAY - EARLIER THAT DAY

Mashalla and Batool are standing at the door, Mashalla is just about to leave for work, they are arguing.

BATTOOL

You are never home, Mashalla-jun...
You bought us this big, fancy house
but you are never here to enjoy it!

MASHALLA

If you let me have a wife, Madaar,
I would be home every night.

BATTOOL

Little Akram needs you!

NEW ANGLE

Little Akram is in her nightgown, sitting on the stairs, listening to Batool and Mashalla argue.

MASHALLA (V.O.)

What Akram needs is her mother.
Instead she has a grandmother.

BACK TO SHOT

BATTOOL

And a father who is never home!

MASHALLA

I have to go, Madaar. I have a very
important meeting today.

BATTOOL

You say that every day.

MASHALLA

And every day it's true.

Mashalla slams the door behind him.

FADE INTO:

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / BATOOL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Batool looks at Akram who is still waiting for a response.

BATOOL

Yes. It's true. I am your
grandmother. Your mother died when
you were born and that is that. Now
are you happy?

Batool resumes, yet again, bowing her forehead to the floor,
unaware of the effect her statement has had on her
granddaughter.

Akram's eyes burn but she doesn't cry. Instead she jumps up
and turns the radio on full blast.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Akram! Turn that off right now! I
can't hear myself pray!

Akram starts to dance to the MUSIC, in a mad, uncompromising
fashion, her black eyes glaring at her grandmother, a
possessed look on her face.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

Akram! Turn that off... now!

Akram twirls madly, round and round, frantically kicking her
legs like a Cossack until Batool turns OFF the MUSIC.

Akram stops and the two of them are at a momentary stand-off
until Akram throws off her chador and runs out of Batool's
room.

Batool goes chasing after her.

EXT. TEHRAN - DAY

A bus stops at a station. People get off, others get on. All
chatting in lively discourse and wearing summer clothes.

At the window is the only young woman in full chadoHer sad
eyes watch the life that passes by.

EXT. MASHALLA'S NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE - DAY

The young woman walks down the street, careful to keep her face covered, and stands at the door of a house next to Mashalla's. She knocks.

Seconds later a STYLISH WOMAN mid-40's answers the door. She smiles, lets the young woman inside.

INT. MASHALLA'S NEIGHBOR'S HOUSE - SAME

The Stylish Woman points to the staircase. The young woman takes the chador from her face. It's Shamsi, as beautiful as ever if not slightly paled by sorrow.

STYLISH WOMAN

Take your time, I'll make some tea.

EXT. ROOFTOP - SAME

Shamsi enters and walks to the edge of the roof, lying on the ground so as not to be seen. She watches the garden next door. Her face brightens.

EXT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / GARDEN - DAY

Akram is in the garden with the male cousins from before, one of them has a bike and is riding in circles around a patch of pebbles.

Akram climbs up on a rock.

AKRAM

Me! I want to now! It's my turn!

One of the Boys rides the bike over to Akram.

BOY 1

But you can't ride!

AKRAM

So?

The Boys laugh and hold the bike out for Akram.

BOY 1

OK, go ahead, daredevil!

Akram squeals with delight and hops on. She momentarily understands the danger of her actions but doesn't care. It's too late now!

AKRAM

Don't let go of the handlebars!

Boy 1 runs with the Akram on the bike over the pebbles with Akram laughing in glee, her little head bobbing up and down.

EXT. ROOFTOP - SAME

Shamsi is now on edge, literally.

EXT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / GARDEN - SAME

Batool now comes running out from the kitchen.

BATOOOL

No! Akram! Get off! You're going to lose it!

As soon as Boy 1 hears Batool's voice he flips out, let's go of the handles, and the two of them cower by the fence.

ROOFTOP

Shamsi stands now, holding her breath.

AKRAM...

... and the bike picks up speed as it hurdles down the slope of the garden. Akram, her little legs too short to reach the pedals, goes flying into a rose bush, head first, her skirt hitched up above her.

Batool runs over, Tuba and Moty behind her.

AKRAM

That was fun!

Batool, Tuba and Moty pull Akram out of the brush and Batool starts to cover her with her Akram's skirt when she steps back, white as a ghost. There's a streak of blood on Akram's thigh near her panties.

BATOOOL

Oh my God! It happened! Tuba, she lost her virginity on the bicycle! I'm as careful with you as I can be - all these years - and now this! I told you never to go on a bicycle!

Tuba lifts the child and takes her in her arms. Akram has some scratches on her arms and face.

TUBA
Batool, calm down. She was
scratched by a thorn.

Tuba and Moty go into the house with Akram as Batool wags a finger at the boys.

BATOOL
And you two...

Suddenly Batool's attention is caught by something above her. She looks. Nothing.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
Run off now, or I'll make you
regret you were ever born.

They do it. Fast.

ROOFTOP

Breathless, Shamsi makes her way out of Batool's sight line.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE / BEDROOM - NIGHT

Batool, Akram and Moty are on the mattress on the floor, Akram is sitting on the bed while Batool dresses her scrapes from the bike fall.

BATOOL
I told you not to go on bikes! They
can be very dangerous!

MOTY
At least you didn't break anything,
right Grandmother?

BATOOL
At the very least. What am I going
to tell Baba?

Batool shakes her head, tsk, tsk, tsk...

AKRAM
He's never here so you can't tell
him anything.

Akram sticks her tongue out and Batool swiftly puts some ointment on Akram's scrape.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Ouch!

MOTY

You poor baby.

BATOOL

He does come home. To eat, to have a shower. You just don't see him because you're asleep.

AKRAM

Where is he when I'm awake?

BATOOL

With one of his harlots.

Akram and Moty look confused.

AKRAM

His what?

BATOOL

Clients. One of his clients.

AKRAM

He's always with them! Doesn't he want to be with us?

BATOOL

Apparently not.

Akram and Moty look at each other as Batool stands and gathers the ointment and bandages.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE 2 - NIGHT

A modern, elevated, one story home in the old Saltanat Abad district of Tehran, the neighborhood of the rich and famous.

Soft lights and candles illuminate a party happening... on the terrace and inside, they're all drinking champagne, enjoying cocktails, and wearing the latest fashions. Traditional Persian music plays.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE 2 - SAME

The creme de la creme of Tehran's artists, literati, and politicians mingle with each other.

On the sofa at one end of the room Mashalla holds court, two very well put-together Women on either side of him.

Three or four Men make a lazy circle, one in particular stands out because of the Woman on his arm who is wearing a spectacular diamond necklace.

Hanging on the wall behind Mashalla is the gorgeous Persian rug we saw lying on the floor at Akram's Marin County home at the beginning.

Mashalla gestures toward the rug.

MASHALLA

That, my friends, is a very special rug. As you all know, I made a lot of money in my first venture with Jalil.

WELL DRESSED MAN

The apartment building with the jewelry shop on Apadana, correct?

MASHALLA

Yes, and I would have made much more had I not been so generous by accepting this rug as payment for one of them.

WELL DRESSED MAN

That's where I bought this necklace for my wife.

Mashalla smiles.

MASHALLA

Evidently he's doing quite well with no rent to pay!

WELL DRESSED MAN

You mean that rug was your payment?

MASHALLA

Yes.

Mashalla goes to the rug, the others look over at him. He speaks as if he's talking to a person.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

But look at her. She's absolutely perfect. Here, around the edges, are Persia's most famous lovers, Samson and Delilah, Layla and Majnun, Khosrow and Shirin, with Rumi and his harem making up the center. It's simply irreplaceable.

Mashalla looks at his guests who have now gathered around him, one of the women has taken his arm.

MASHALLA (CONT'D)

You can have all the money you want, and everything else for that matter, but I have this. If nothing else, I have this.

INT. AZADI PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL ART ROOM - DAY

Akram and Neda are at a table, there's a tall stack of art paper in front of them, all have been painted on.

2 or 3 patients are sitting at easels, painting.

NEDA

I guess your father lost the only woman he would ever love and that rug became her replacement. How often did you see him?

Akram starts to look through Neda's paintings. They're mainly dark.

AKRAM

Once a week he would come home to eat and stay the night. I missed him so much but I refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing that I did. In fact, he made me mad most of the time so it was better I kept my mouth shut.

NEDA

In what way?

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Batool is dressing Akram for the day.

AKRAM

But Mommy, I want to go to school, too! Why does Moty get to go to school and I don't?

BATOOL

Because you are not yet old enough to go to school, Akram.

AKRAM

But can't you just tell them I want
to go, too? I won't be any trouble!

MASHALLA (V.O.)

Madaar!!! Where is my towel?

BATOOL

Coming!

Batool drops what she's doing and goes out of the room.

AKRAM

Mommy!

Akram follows.

HALLWAY

Akram watches Batool hand Mashalla a towel through the crack
in the door.

AKRAM (V.O.)

I don't know how many times I
watched him do that, until I just
lost it one day.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - AKRAM'S BEDROOM

The windows to her room open out onto the back garden. It's a
lovely summer morning. A record player and a stack of albums
are along one wall. A Western pop song is playing.

Akram, now 13 and looking more like a woman, is at a mirror
wearing the white blouse and blue and white checkered skirt
that is her school uniform. She is finishing a hairstyle that
manages her wild curls, singing along to the music.

She stands, folds the top of her skirt to make it shorter and
starts dancing to the music, making sexy moves. The song ends
and she turns off the record player, puts her skirt back to
its normal length, grabs her school bag, and leaves the room.

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE - HALLWAY - SAME

Akram is closing the door to her room when she hears her
father's voice coming from the bathroom. She stops.

MASHALLA (V.O.)

Madaar! My towel! Where is my
towel?!

Akram stomps over to the door and opens it a crack.

AKRAM

From now on you can get your own
bloody towel!

Akram slams the door and runs down the stairs, passing Batool who is on her way up with a towel in her hand. She stops and watches Akram run out of the house.

BATOOOL

Akram!

But Akram is gone. Batool shakes her head as she climbs up the stairs. On the landing she sees Mashalla, standing in a pool of water, a far too small towel around his waist. Batool laughs.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - SAME

Akram is walking along the street with her friend MINA, a pretty, self-assured young woman with inquisitive eyes. Akram's skirt is now at its actual length.

MINA

Oh my god, so then what happened?

AKRAM

I have no idea! I ran out of there
as fast as I could. I hope he goes
back to his place tonight so I
don't have to see him again today!

Mina looks behind her, then leans in to Akram.

MINA

Akram, you know the essays we wrote
last week?

AKRAM

You mean the one you got such a bad
grade on?

Akram smiles.

MINA

Yes, and the one you got a really
good grade on. Can I use it as a
reference?

Akram reaches into her bag for it.

AKRAM

Sure! I'm flattered!

Mina looks behind her again, then takes the paper from Akram.

MINA

Great. Don't worry, I'll get it back to you today.

AKRAM

No hurry.

They arrive at the school, a rowdy crowd of almost 100 girls wearing the school uniform.

Mina looks outside the school yard then turns back to Akram.

MINA

I forgot something in another classroom from yesterday, I'll see you in a few minutes

AKRAM

I have some business in the girl's room anyway.

Mina and Akram part ways with a kiss on the cheek. Akram looks around then nods to a smaller girl who follows Akram into the bathrooms.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - SAME

Mina exits the school and looks around. A woman appears across the street in a chador, Mina goes over.

Mina and the woman meet, her face partially visible. Mina hands her Akram's paper.

MINA

Here it is. But be prepared. She thinks you're dead.

The woman looks up and we see that it's Shamsi, her hair now turning grey, her eyes sad, her face drawn.

SHAMSI

She does?

MINA

It's hard to live with myself knowing she thinks you're dead and I know you aren't!

SHAMSI

You'll have to tell her.

MINA

You better read it, I have to get back.

Shamsi reads, tears begin to fall onto the page. She finishes, looks up at Mina.

SHAMSI

This is awful. I mean, what she wrote, not the paper. She's a very good writer. Can't you please tell her that I'm alive, Mina?

MINA

I don't know. She may want to see you and then...

We can HEAR the school BELL ring. Shamsi shakes her head no, emphatically.

SHAMSI

No, no she won't. She has far too much respect for her grandmother. She just needs to know.

MINA

I wouldn't know what to tell her.

SHAMSI

You're a bright girl with a good heart. You'll think of something.

Mina smiles, but is not convinced.

INT. SCHOOL BATHROOM - DAY

Akram is standing with the other girl, counting coins. She hands the girl a few of the coins.

AKRAM

5 Tomans, OK? And you'll get it back tomorrow...

The girls begin the switch and in no time, Akram is wearing the much shorter girl's skirt while the little one drowns in Akram's.

Akram looks at herself in the mirror and takes in that nice bit of leg that's showing.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Perfect!

Smiling, the girls leave the bathroom just as the BELL RINGS.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - SAME

The school day is ending and the girls stream out onto the yard. Mina and Akram find each other in the melee. They lock arms and leave school together.

EXT. STREET - SAME

MINA

What happened to the mini skirt?

AKRAM

I had to give it back. I guess there's a school policy about short skirts.

The girls smile at the obviousness of the statement.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Hey, how did you do on that English test? I'm so bad at it, I think I might have failed!

MINA

Oh, I did great. I love English. I want to live in England someday.

AKRAM

England? Why?

MINA

I don't know. Maybe because that's where Paul McCartney lives!

The girls giggle.

MINA (CONT'D)

Oh, and here's your paper. Thanks again.

Mina hands Akram's paper to her. Akram notices the ink has run where Shamsi's tears fell.

AKRAM

What happened here? Did you drool all over it?

Mina suddenly stiffens.

MINA

Oh, no, I... I spilled something on it.

AKRAM

You never spill anything on anything. What happened, really?

Mina stops and faces Akram squarely.

MINA

Akram, I have to tell you something.

Akram looks at Mina with wide eyes.

AKRAM

Tell!

MINA

I don't think your mother is dead.

Akram looks at her with a curious tilt of the head.

MINA (CONT'D)

I mean, well, I know she isn't dead because I talked to her this morning.

AKRAM

You what!? That's impossible. Everyone knows my mother is dead. She died giving birth to me! Why are you doing this?

Mina takes Akram's shoulders.

MINA

No, really, I've been talking to her and telling her about you and I gave her your paper to read because she wanted to know how you're doing and she didn't even know you thought she was dead so she...

AKRAM

Stop! I... I have to go home.

Akram walks quickly away from Mina, leaving her standing there, at a loss.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - SAME

Batool and Tuba are preparing Kebab Koubideh, kneading minced meat like dough then putting it on metal skewers.

The front door SLAMS and Batool looks up, surprised.

BATOOOL

What's she doing home so early?

Akram enters the kitchen, ignores Tuba, and stands right in front of Batool.

AKRAM

I want to see my mother's grave.

Batool holds her anger in check.

BATOOOL

You what? Who have you been talking to?

Batool throws a glance at Tuba.

AKRAM

No one. I just want to see her grave. I have a right.

Batool looks back at her work and slowly continues with her skewers. Tuba is desperate to talk but doesn't.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Grandmother? Auntie!

Silence. Akram is shaking. She raises her voice.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Why aren't you saying anything?
Fine. If you won't talk, Baba will!

Akram runs out of the kitchen and we HEAR her STOMP upstairs.

TUBA

Batool...

BATOOOL

You traitor! You told her. It could only have been you. Where were you before you got here today?

TUBA

So now you think I was hanging around the school yard to ruin Akram's day, do you? Batool, be careful.

BATOOOL

Where else could she have heard it?

TUBA

I don't know but it wasn't me who told her. Although I could have. Many times. This whole thing hasn't been easy or pleasant and if I were you, I would tell her before Mashalla does.

BATOOOL

Mashalla is off doing business somewhere in England, he won't tell her anything.

TUBA

Well, she's going to find out sooner or later, so do it now before she finds out from Shamsi herself! You won't be able to hide the fact that you lied, but...

BATOOOL

Well if I'm a liar then so are you, Tuba!

Batool huffs out of the kitchen.

TUBA

Mighty Allah, I beg of you, please forgive this poor woman.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / AKRAM'S BEDROOM - SAME

Akram has changed out of her school clothes and is now wearing a short skirt and a sexy top. Batool barges in.

BATOOOL

What are you wearing?

Batool reaches for anything to cover Akram up, and shoves it into Akram's hands. Akram throws it down.

AKRAM

I am wearing whatever I want to wear. Now tell me where my mother's grave is.

Batool approaches Akram. Stand off. She gets in her face.

BATOOOL

I will tell you once and you will never mention it again, not to anyone. Ever. Do you understand?

Akram nods quickly in anticipation.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)

Your mother was a dancer. Do you know what that means? She was a dancer and a dancer is like a whore, a prostitute! When your father married her, he brought shame to this family and I wouldn't stand for it so they had to divorce. And because I didn't want you to grow up to be the daughter of a slut, you became my daughter.

Akram sits down in the bed in disappointed relief.

BATOOOL (CONT'D)

There. Now I have told you the truth and we will never have the need to mention it again.

Batool leaves Akram alone with her feelings.

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Neda is in her robe and getting ready for bed.

NEDA

She told you she was a dancer?

AKRAM

In that moment I thought it was better to think she was dead.

Neda sits on the edge of the bed and faces her mother.

NEDA

Maybe the lie was better than the truth.

AKRAM

I don't know. Lies just perpetuate more lies, don't they?

Neda picks up a pen that's on the table next to the bed and starts to doodle on a piece of paper.

NEDA

Easy to say, not so easy to do.

AKRAM

Have you ever heard of the theory of Karma, Neda?

Neda looks up.

NEDA

I think so. What does it mean?

While Akram talks, Neda alternates between looking at her mother and drawing some things on the paper while listening.

AKRAM

Karma is the Buddhist concept of God. But they see it more like a mystic chain of actions and reactions that accumulate throughout eternity, connecting humanity, and are passed on from our ancestors through us. It's like this infinite cycle of causes and effects that continue on until someone in the chain decides to end it and take it in another direction.

NEDA

Wait. That's interesting.

Neda writes something on the paper.

AKRAM

What's interesting?

NEDA

This!

She holds up the piece of paper and hands it to Akram.

There are little drawings with the words KARMA, underneath that: AKRAM.

NEDA (CONT'D)

Look! You are karma!

Neda smiles.

NEDA (CONT'D)
Your name, Akram... Karma...

Akram looks at the connection and smiles.

AKRAM
My grandmother told me once that
Akram was one of the thousand names
of God.

NEDA
It looks like she was right. Oh,
Madaar, my brain is about to
explode. Can we continue talking
tomorrow?

AKRAM
What about your medication?

NEDA
I'm not going to take it tonight.

AKRAM
Are you sure?

NEDA
I'm sure. Will I see you tomorrow?
I don't think you're quite finished
with our story.

AKRAM
Of course, I'll see you in the
morning. Good night, Neda-Jun.

NEDA
Good night, Madaar.

Akram kisses Neda on the forehead then takes the piece of paper with Karma/Akram written on it and places it next to Neda on the night stand. She turns off the light then exits.

FADE INTO:

NEDA'S DREAM

A staircase... a door... 3 women in chadors run to the door, it flies open... there stands a beautiful woman, her long hair flowing behind her, her arms outstretched... A little girl, maybe 8 years old, runs to her outstretched arms... before she can get there the doorway disappears... the little girl falls into an abyss...

and the beautiful woman is lying on a bed, screaming... women in chadors surround her... she is giving birth... someone rips a black thing out of the woman's womb... everyone screams...

BACK TO SHOT

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Neda wakes with a start, sweating, out of breath.

She gets her bearings then sees the piece of paper on the night stand.

NEDA
Akram... Karma...

There's a KNOCK.

AKRAM (V.O.)
Neda? Are you awake?

Neda jumps up to the door and throws her arms around her mother's neck.

NEDA
Madaar, I had the most horrible dream. It was so vivid!

AKRAM
Why don't you get dressed and we'll go down to breakfast? You can tell me about it then.

NEDA
Madaar, I want to leave here.

AKRAM
That's good!

NEDA
Today.

AKRAM
Oh, I don't know about that, but... Let's go have breakfast and talk. You can tell me about your dream. Then I can tell you the rest of the story. Do you remember where we left off?

Neda starts to get dressed.

NEDA

You just found out that your mother was alive. You must have wanted desperately to see her.

AKRAM

I did. But Shamsi was right, I couldn't do that to Batool. Not yet, anyway. My life had to change first.

EXT. MODEST APARTMENT BLDG. - DAY

Tuba, hiding behind her chador, is watching a house across the street. The curtains are drawn.

Tuba sees a Man leave the house, a Woman wearing a blue chador is in the doorway waving goodbye. The door closes, the Man walks away.

Tuba crosses the street, goes to the house, looks around, then knocks. No answer. She opens the door and goes in.

INT. SHAMSI'S APARTMENT - SAME

The place is dark, heavy curtains block the windows.

Tuba enters and adjusts her eyes to the dark.

TUBA

Shamsi, what are you doing?

Shamsi looks up as Tuba opens the drapes.

SHAMSI

Tuba!

The sunlight floods in and Tuba sees that Shamsi is praying, a black rock in front of her prayer rug.

TUBA

Why are you praying in the dark?

Shamsi squints at the bright sunlight, her face no longer that of the vibrant young woman she once was.

TUBA (CONT'D)

You should be outside, enjoying life, not cooped up in here.

Shamsi holds up the stone.

SHAMSI

A holy stone. It was a gift from my husband. He brought it from Mecca.

TUBA

God wants you to be happy, Shamsi, he doesn't want you to pray to a holy stone all day!

Shamsi looks at the stone in her lap, smiles weakly at Tuba.

SHAMSI

I don't know what else to do, Tuba. I married Hajie so I could see Akram but he won't let me see her... or any of my family members.

TUBA

Not even your sister?

SHAMSI

She doesn't wear the hajib, she is not pious enough. And he is so jealous of Akram.

TUBA

But you have other children!

SHAMSI

I love all of my children but he thinks I love Akram more.

TUBA

Because of Mashalla?

SHAMSI

Oh, Tuba, I thought that because he has another wife he would let me be, but it's just the same as being a full time wife.

Tuba removes the scarf from her head.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Do you know what the worst part of it is? He is so jealous of Akram, he's forbidden me from seeing her as well. This is not how I pictured my life. I was so naive.

Tuba is deeply moved.

TUBA

I have some good news. Perhaps it
will bring you joy.

Tuba sits across from Shamsi.

TUBA (CONT'D)

Akram is getting married.

SHAMSI

Is he a nice man? Akram's fiance?

TUBA

He's nice enough. But he won't
understand her. All praise be to
Allah, but I don't think anyone
ever will.

Shamsi smiles sadly at Tuba's comment.

TUBA (CONT'D)

If you would like to see her, Hajie
doesn't have to know.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / AKRAM'S BEDROOM - DAY

There are several packed boxes stacked to one side, Akram is
meticulously sorting through her album collection. Stacks of
perfectly folded clothes are on the bed.

The PHONE RINGS and Akram goes to answer it.

HALLWAY

AKRAM

Yes? Hello?... She is, one moment,
please. Batool, someone on the
phone for you.

Batool comes out of the kitchen and takes the phone.

BATOOL

Yes?... Oh, hello... Yes. Here she
is.

Batool hands the receiver to Akram.

BATOOL (CONT'D)

It's for you. It's your mother.

Akram chokes up. Batool shakes the receiver at her as if to
say, "Take it". Akram does so.

AKRAM
Hello?... Yes, of course. I...
well, I don't know... All right.

Akram hands the phone Batool.

AKRAM (CONT'D)
She wants to ask you something.

Batool rolls her eyes, takes the phone.

BATOOL
Yes?... No... Mashalla won't like
it. You can see her, but she can't
stay the night... All right, see
you tomorrow.

Batool hangs up, coughs into a handkerchief then folds it up,
but not before Akram notices a small patch of blood on it.

AKRAM
Are you all right?

BATOOL
I'm fine.

Batool starts to go back into the kitchen.

AKRAM
She wanted me to spend the night
with her?

Batool nods, then disappears into the kitchen.

Akram, in a slight state of shock, leans against the wall and
stares into space.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / HALLWAY - DAY

Akram, Batool, Tuba, and Moty are in the hallway, Akram is
opening the front door. Shamsi, standing there in her blue
chador with some flowers in her hand, smiles at Akram. Akram
nervously shows her in, and they embrace awkwardly.

Batool leads them into the living room while Tuba takes the
flowers from Shamsi.

AKRAM (V.O.)
The next day I met my mother the
stranger for the first time and the
day after that I married a man who
was also a stranger.
(MORE)

AKRAM (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 It wasn't until much, much later
 that I understood why my mother
 asked to spend the night with me.

EXT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / GARDEN - DAY

The garden is bursting with summer color. It's decorated festively with fairy lights and flowers, the Sophre Agd is spread out, the guests congregate around it.

AKRAM (V.O.)
 She wanted to spend time with me
 while I still saw the world through
 innocent eyes.

Akram and PARVIS, 20's, stand together in the middle. Mashalla is on one side, Batool, in a wheelchair, is next to him, beaming. She coughs into a handkerchief. A photo is taken. Akram's school friend Mina is among the guests.

The group breaks up and Mashalla gives his daughter a hug and a kiss, does the same to Parvis.

MASHALLA
 You make a beautiful bride, Akram-
 jun. I wish you both the very best
 of everything. May you want for
 nothing.

Parvis, a serious young man with a sparkle in his eye, bows to Mashalla in respect.

PARVIS
 I will be a very good husband to
 your daughter and protect her with
 the utmost care, Mr. Arastehjoo.

MASHALLA
 I hope you are able to do all of
 that, Parvis, and more. She is a
 special girl.

Akram blushes as Parvis holds her a bit too tightly around the waist.

LATER - NIGHT

The party is in full swing, the guests have loosened up, children are running around.

Akram, Moty, and a group of women are sitting around a table.

Parvis is standing in a small group of three or four Men. He looks over at Akram catches her eye. They smile at each other.

MOTY

So, Little Akram is married, now what? Cooking, cleaning, and baby makes three?

AKRAM

I hope not too soon! I want to get my driver's license, maybe go to school, get a job.

MOTY

A job? I don't think so. Not while you're married to Parvis, anyway.

Just then an elegant woman in her late 30's approaches, this is MRS. KAMALA. Akram stands and Mrs. Kamala embraces Akram.

MRS. KAMALA

Akram-jun! I wish you all the best. Parvis is a very lucky man. Welcome to our family!

AKRAM

Thank you, Mrs. Kamala.

MRS. KAMALA

And if there's ever anything at all I can do, don't hesitate to call me.

Mrs. Kamala takes Akram by the shoulders, leans into her, and gives her a serious look.

MRS. KAMALA (CONT'D)

And I mean anything, my dear.

And with that she goes off.

AKRAM

What do you think she meant by that?

MOTY

I can only imagine.

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / BEDROOM - NIGHT

The door opens into the darkened room and Parvis leads his bashful bride toward the bed. They stand there together when all of a sudden there are GIGGLES coming from the hallway.

Parvis goes back to the door and leans out.

PARVIS

You can be sure nothing will happen
as long as you're out there in the
hall!

He comes back into the room and smiles reassuringly at Akram then begins to undress her.

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Akram is sitting on the floor of her new home, arranging her record albums. We see boxes around, some half unpacked, other unopened.

Akram puts an album on the record player and some Western music plays. There's a knock at the door.

Akram opens the door and there is a 10 year-old girl standing in the threshold. Her name is AZAM.

AKRAM

Azam? What are you doing here?
Where's your mother?

AZAM

She's at your Grandmother's who
told me to come and cook lunch for
you and Parvis since you don't know
how to cook yet.

AKRAM

Is that what she said?

Azam nods yes.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Well, you can tell my Grandmother
that I do know how to cook and I
don't need you to do it for me.
Thank you.

Azam skips off. Akram shuts the door in amused disbelief.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - SAME

Akram is in her modern kitchen, cleaning up after lunch.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM

Parviz is organizing papers as Akram comes out of the kitchen.

PARVIZ

Oh, by the way, I canceled your driving lessons. I can teach you.

Akram stops in her tracks and looks at Parviz.

PARVIZ (CONT'D)

They called while you were washing up. Don't lie to me again.

AKRAM

It was meant to be a surprise.

PARVIZ

I don't like surprises. Now what are we going to do this afternoon?

Akram stands, dumbfounded.

INT. PAYMAN BEAUTY SALON - DAY

Akram walks into a beauty salon and PAYMAN, an attractive, effeminate hairdresser approaches.

PAYMAN

Darling!

Akram touches her wild curls.

AKRAM

I need you again...

Payman takes her coat and leads her to a chair while talking.

PAYMAN

Of course you do. As I always say, a woman needs her hairdresser more than any man!

Akram laughs as Payman puts a smock around her.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM

Parviz is sitting on the couch, his eyes glued to the door. Akram enters and sees Parviz staring at the door.

AKRAM

Parviz! You're home early.

PARVIZ

You've had your hair done again.

AKRAM

Do you like it?

PARVIZ

I told you before that it's an unnecessary expense.

AKRAM

But Parviz, I like getting my hair done. And we have the money.

Akram, smiling, spreads her arms and does a little spin.

PARVIZ

You don't need to do it.

AKRAM

Maybe not, but I like to. Why would you be against something that makes me happy?

PARVIZ

Because I am the one you need to make happy and I like your hair the other way.

He disappears into the kitchen then comes back out chewing something, walks past Akram, and leaves the house, slamming the door behind him.

AKRAM

Parviz!

EXT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE - DAY

Akram is outside, taking the laundry off the line, folding each piece perfectly before putting it in the basket.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akram and Parviz are getting ready to go out. Akram is wearing a beautiful, floor length dress, her hair is up and she is wearing long, dangling earrings. Parviz is putting on a tie. He watches her looking at herself.

PARVIZ

I can see through that dress.

AKRAM

Where?

Akram looks at herself from a few different angles.

PARVIZ

And it's too short.

AKRAM

You're kidding, right?

Parviz looks at Akram, his jaw clenches.

PARVIZ

Why don't you wear the green skirt with the white blouse. I like the way you look in that.

AKRAM

I'm wearing this. It's perfectly fine. I'm not going to change.

PARVIZ

If you want to go to the party you'll change your clothes.

AKRAM

I like it and I am going to wear it.

PARVIZ

I said it's see-through and it's too short so you're not wearing it.

AKRAM

But, Parviz...

PARVIZ

Change. I don't want other men to see you that way.

AKRAM

They don't look at me that way! You only 'think' they do!

PARVIZ

I'm a man, so I know they do. Now
take it off, right now, before I
rip it off of you.

AKRAM

Then we're not going.

They stare at each other for a moment then Akram goes over to the radio and turns it on. LOUD PERSIAN MUSIC blares out and Akram starts to dance. Parviz's face starts to twitch. He turns off the radio and gets into Akram's face, the veins on his face pulsating in anger.

PARVIZ

You are going to change your
clothes and we are going to the
party and that is the last thing
you are going to say about it.

Akram starts to walk off but Parviz grabs her wrist.

PARVIZ (CONT'D)

Take off that dress. Now.

Akram slowly begins to undress, tears welling up then flowing down her cheeks.

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - DAY

Akram walks around the spotless house, checking for dust.
None to be found.

She sits on the sofa, looks at her watch.

She goes to the mirror, checks her face, her makeup, her hair. She picks at her curls then sticks her tongue out at herself.

She goes to the phone, dials a number.

AKRAM

Moty, hi! ... No, just bored out of
my wits... Lunch?... Oh, I would
love to, but... No, it's OK, I just
have to be back by 2 o'clock...
Great. See you soon!

Akram giggles with joy as she hangs up the phone. Checking her face one more time, she leaves the house.

FADE TO:

INT. BATOOL'S HOUSE LIVING ROOM - DAY

Akram, Batool, Moty, Tuba and three other Women are having a lively lunch. There is a lot of conversation, talking over each other, children running in and out, plates being cleared, tea being brought in. Akram is relaxed and happy.

There is a knock at the door. Moty gets up.

MOTY

I'll go!

She disappears into the hallway and comes back momentarily with Parviz, a grave look on his face. Akram looks up, immediately tensing.

AKRAM

Parviz! What are you doing here?

PARVIZ

I'm here to take you home for lunch. It's nearly 3 o'clock.

Akram rises.

AKRAM

But I've already had lunch.

Parviz grabs her by the wrist...

PARVIZ

Not with me you haven't.

And drags her out of the house.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akram is in bed, trying to fall sleep. Parviz comes in and gets into the bed with her. She opens her eyes then turns away from him.

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / BEDROOM - DAY

Parviz gets out of bed, leaving Akram to sleep. He dresses, leaves the bedroom.

Akram opens her eyes and waits until she hears the front door slam shut.

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - DAY

Akram comes out of the bedroom in her dressing gown. She goes into the kitchen, then comes back out again with a cup of tea.

There's a KNOCK at the door. She goes to the door.

AKRAM
Who is it?

MOTY
It's me, Moty. I brought yazdi.

Akram grabs the doorknob and turns it. It won't budge. She shakes the door.

AKRAM
Moty! I can't open the door. I think it's locked.

EXT. APARTMENT BLDG. HALLWAY - SAME

Moty is outside with a pastry box.

MOTY
Well unlock it!

Moty grabs onto the doorknob and jiggles it.

AKRAM (V.O.)
It's been locked from the outside.
Moty, I think Parviz locked me in!

MOTY
He couldn't have...

INT. PARVIS AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - SAME

AKRAM
He must have. What am I going to do?

MOTY
You'll just have to wait until he gets home. I'll call you later, OK?

AKRAM
OK.

Akram slides down the door with her back against it, tears start to stream down her face.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT DAY

Parviz and Akram are silently finishing lunch. Akram stands, clears the plates, disappears into the kitchen. Parviz takes a newspaper and begins to read. Akram comes back out.

AKRAM

Parviz?

No answer.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Parviz!

He looks up.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Did you lock the door today so I
couldn't get out?

Parviz looks up briefly then goes back to his paper.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Do you know how dangerous that is?
There could have been a fire! Or I
could have had a heart attack.

Parviz doesn't look up, just shakes his head at the ridiculousness of it.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Parviz! Are you listening to me? I
will not let you lock me in here. I
am going to call my father and tell
him what you have done if you do it
one more time.

Parviz looks up again slowly from his paper.

PARVIZ

I am your husband and how I keep
you safe from predators is my
business. Your father has no say in
the matter.

AKRAM

Oh, but I think he does, especially
if you'd like to continue enjoying
the allowance he sends.

Parviz and Akram stare at each other until Parviz goes back to reading his paper.

INT. MINA'S APARTMENT - DAY

Akram and her friend Mina from school are drinking tea in Mina's living room, the sun is shining through the windows, it's a beautiful day. Mina is very pregnant.

AKRAM

I don't know what to do, Mina. He treats me like his property. He won't let me get my hair done, or take driving lessons! I had lunch with my family the other day and he came over and took me away from them. And yesterday morning I found he had locked me inside when he went to work!

MINA

Why would he do something like that?

AKRAM

He's so worried about someone sneaking in and looking at my ankles that he doesn't care if I die of smoke inhalation!

Mina and Akram laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

MINA

You should have a baby, Akram. That's the only way.

AKRAM

But I don't want to have a baby yet! I want to get my driving license and I want to go to school so I can get a job and, well, I have so many plans!

MINA

Marriage should be your plan now. Meals, children, and making your husband happy.

AKRAM

What about me and my happiness, Mina? And yours! Didn't you want to marry Paul McCartney!?

Mina looks at her friend with sad eyes.

MINA

Dreams are for little girls Akram.
Have a baby, Akram. Be a good wife.

SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. STREET - SAME

Akram is walking absentmindedly along the street, her thoughts back at Mina's. She accidentally bumps into a young man. He apologizes, Akram tenses. She looks around, pulls her coat around herself.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akram and Parviz are in bed, having sex. He is on top of her, she is crying.

EXT. VEGETABLE MARKET - DAY

Akram, now highly pregnant, is shopping for vegetables. The sparkle of her eyes diminished.

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / KITCHEN - DAY

Akram is cooking dinner, almost in a catatonic state. She feels something. It's time. The baby is on its way.

INT. HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Akram is just waking up from a C-Section. Parviz is by her side and A NURSE is handing the baby to Akram. She looks forlornly at the small thing in her arms. Parviz, the proud father, smiles at the baby.

END MONTAGE

AKRAM (V.O.)

Mashalla and Batool were
disappointed that you weren't a
boy. But I didn't care. You were so
beautiful... so small... So
helpless.

END MONTAGE

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Neda has been crying, Akram is holding her hands.

NEDA
I'd forgotten how badly he treated
you.

AKRAM
I always tried as best I could to
protect you from knowing just how
unreasonable he was.

NEDA
And in the process you forgot to
care what I thought about you.

AKRAM
Somehow I didn't believe you'd
think ill of me, either.

NEDA
My entire life is based on how ill
I felt as a child.

Neda walks over to the window and sits down, looking out. The
bird lands on the railing.

NEDA (CONT'D)
And as far as I can tell, there
hasn't been one happy person in
this entire family yet.

AKRAM
Well, at least Batool got her
chance at redemption. It was when
you were just a baby...

CUT TO:

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE / LIVING ROOM

Akram is with baby NEDA while Moty sets the table for lunch.
The PHONE RINGS. Akram answers it.

AKRAM
Hello? Uncle!... Yes, the baby is
fine... She's what?... Oh my God,
yes, we're coming now.

Akram hangs up the phone.

AKRAM (CONT'D)
It's Batool.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / BATOOL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Now a make-shift hospital room, Batool, pale, thin, almost delirious, is lying in bed.

Akram, a Nurse, and Mashalla are there.

MASHALLA
Can't you give her more morphine?

NURSE
I've already given her the most I possibly can, Mr. Arasteh.

Batool is unsettled, Mashalla out of his mind with worry.

AKRAM
Father, you must let nature take its course.

MASHALLA
I can't watch her suffer like this.
It's unbearable.

Batool starts to talk and Mashalla grabs her hand.

BATOOL
I can't go... She is holding me...
holding me... help me... help...

MASHALLA
I can't help...

Mashalla lets go of Batool's hand, retreating to the window.
Akram takes his place at Batool's side.

AKRAM
Who is holding you, Maman? Who?

Batool pleads with her eyes.

BATOOL
She is... She is holding me and the
devil will course through my veins
until she releases me.

Akram looks at the Nurse.

AKRAM

Do you have any idea who she's talking about?

NURSE

I think I heard her say the name Shamsi this morning. Do you know a Shamsi?

Akram and her father look at each other.

AKRAM

I'll go get her.

MASHALLA

No!

Akram grabs her coat and looks sternly at her father.

AKRAM

I will go and get her.

Mashalla grabs Akram's arm to stop her.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Father. Let me go.

He does, reluctantly.

EXT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE - SAME

Akram is in the doorway, she knocks.

Shamsi comes out tentatively, wearing a black chador from head to foot. She looks inside, closes the door.

SHAMSI

Akram-jun! What are you doing here? My husband will be very angry if he sees you here.

AKRAM

I'm sorry, but we need you.

INT. MASHALLA'S HOUSE / BATOOL'S BEDROOM - SAME

Akram and Shamsi enter the room. Mashalla is gone.

Shamsi approaches Batool who opens her eyes and sees Shamsi standing over her. She raises a weak hand, grips Shamsi's.

BATOOL
You came! Come, closer.

Shamsi leans into Batool.

BATOOL (CONT'D)
Please ask Akram to leave the room.

Shamsi turns to Akram.

SHAMSI
Akram, your grandmother would like
to speak to me alone.

Akram nods, leaves.

BATOOL
Shamsi, the devil has taken me in
his fiery grip... my destiny... I
will take it with me if you don't
release me. Please.

Shamsi looks at Batool, the pain of the last years etched for
eternity in the old woman's face, her fingers clenched in an
unyielding fist.

SHAMSI
I don't know what to say, Batool.

BATOOL
Forgive me. That is all. Forgive me
for taking away the man you loved,
for taking away your baby girl.

SHAMSI
I loved him so much.

BATOOL
And he loved you. I did horrible
things to you... But you have to
forgive me. Please. I thought I had
such a good reason.

SHAMSI
There is no reason that good.
Unless it's purely selfish.

BATOOL
I couldn't bear the thought of
anyone else having him. He was all
I had after everything else was
taken from me.

Shamsi looks at the poor woman who caused her so much agony.

SHAMSI

I know what it's like to have
everything taken away. So I will
forgive you.

Shamsi leans in closer to Batool's ear.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

But I want you to know that I am
not doing it for you. I'm doing it
for Akram.

And with that Shamsi puts Batool's hand over the one that has
been gripping her heart, and leaves the room.

Akram returns and takes Batool's hand. Batool smiles weakly.

BATOOOL

My child. I love you. So very much.

Akram watches as Batool's face softens and a slight smile
crosses her lips as she takes her last breath.

AKRAM (V.O.)

With Batool now gone and forgiven,
I felt I could see my mother, but
it was a mistake.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM -DAY

Shamsi is happy, laying food out on a table and her two
children, FARRIN, 8 and NOURI, 10, are playing a game near
the Korsi.

FARRIN

Are Akram and her baby staying the
night?

SHAMSI

I hope so.

There is a knock.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Nouri-jun, answer the door.

The little boy opens the door. Akram enters with baby Neda.

Shamsi goes to them, embraces Akram, leads her to the Korsi
and the food.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Please, make yourself as comfortable as if you were in your own home. The children's father is not here tonight so we are amongst ourselves.

Akram has a seat on a cushion near the Korsi and lays the baby where it's warm. Nouri and Farrin play with the baby. Shamsi brings Akram a cup of tea.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

It's so nice to see you, Akram. And your beautiful baby.

Akram smiles, but she's impatient.

AKRAM

This is very hard for me. We don't even know each other. I don't really know who you are, or even what to call you.

SHAMSI

I would be very happy if you would call me Maman.

Akram is taken aback.

AKRAM

But I've only had one mother.

SHAMSI

I understand.

AKRAM

Can I ask you something? Maman...?

SHAMSI

Of course.

AKRAM

My grandmother... she told me many lies... and, well, I am assuming you weren't a dancer...?

Shamsi lets out an ironic laugh.

SHAMSI

That sounds like something Batool would have said. No, I wasn't a dancer, Akram. I worked for the Ministry of Health before I married your father.

Akram looks down, embarrassed.

AKRAM

Will you tell me what she told you
the night she died?

SHAMSI

She begged me for forgiveness. Your
father and I were very much in
love. Rumi's poems weren't eloquent
enough to describe the love we had.
But Batool was jealous and she
forced him into divorcing me. When
the day came that you were born,
she took you from me. I never even
got a chance to hold you.

Shamsi lets this sink in for a moment. Then she continues.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Batool did everything she did
because of love. And because I love
you so much, I found it in my heart
to forgive her. As I'm sure you
will be able to someday.

Suddenly we hear the FRONT DOOR OPEN, THEN CLOSE.

HAJIE

Shamsi-jun!

SHAMSI

Hajie!

Panic. Shamsi springs up and she and Akram look around until
Shamsi directs Akram to hide with Neda underneath the lahaf
that covers the Korsi on the far side.

SHAMSI (CONT'D)

Hajie! I thought I would see you
tomorrow...

HAJIE enters just as Shamsi has her well hidden and she can
signal to her children to keep Akram's presence quiet.

HAJIE

Is it a crime that I want to see my
favorite wife? It's dinner time, I
see you have food ready...

The children run to him. "Baba! Baba!" They sit by the Korsi
and start to eat.

UNDER THE BLANKET

Akram and the sleeping Neda are under the lahaf, pressed as close as they can to the side of the pit, sweat pouring off Akram's face, the baby's cheeks red.

INT. SHAMSI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - SAME

It's now a few hours later and Hajie finally stands to go, kissing Shamsi who is almost losing her mind with worry.

He goes, and Shamsi lifts the blanket letting Akram and Neda out from underneath. Akram's face is flushed.

SHAMSI

Are you all right? I am so sorry, I wasn't expecting him. He just does whatever he wants.

AKRAM

Yes, some people are like that, aren't they?

Akram takes Neda and walks to the door with her.

SHAMSI

Where are you going?

AKRAM

Leaving.

SHAMSI

But... why?

AKRAM

We've spent our whole lives not being able to see each other and I've spent my whole life not being able to talk to my father. I refuse to hide or stay silent anymore.

Akram leaves Shamsi who stoically begins cleaning up.

FADE TO

INT. PARVIZ AND AKRAM'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - DAY

Akram and Neda are in the bath together.

Parviz suddenly pulls the curtain to the side and upon seeing Akram's bare breasts, grabs Neda and pulls her out.

Parviz shoves a towel into Akram's hands.

PARVIZ
Get out and cover yourself.

AKRAM
What?

PARVIZ
Get out.

Neda is shivering and starts to cry. Akram tries to give the towel to Neda, Parviz intervenes, Akram rips the towel from him.

AKRAM
Stop it.

Akram steps out of the bath and wraps Neda in the towel.

PARVIZ
You need to cover yourself when you bathe with Neda! It is indecent.

AKRAM
I will not!

Akram stands in front of him - defiant.

PARVIZ
Then you won't bathe with Neda.

Parviz leaves the room. Akram takes Neda in her arms.

Parviz returns wearing swim trunks and a t-shirt. He steps into the bathtub, looks at Akram triumphantly, then gestures for Neda to join him. Neda gives the towel back to Akram and reluctantly gets in the bath.

PARVIZ (CONT'D)
There, now how difficult was that?

INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE - DAY

Akram is sitting opposite a friendly LAWYER.

AKRAM
How long will all of this take?

LAWYER
A few months. If he signs.

AKRAM

Please serve him the papers after
Neda and I have left the country.
Tomorrow we are going to my
father's in London.

Akram stands and so does the lawyer. They shake hands.

INT. HEATHROW AIRPORT - CUSTOMS - DAY

Akram and Neda approach the Customs Officer. She smiles as she slides her papers over to him. He looks at her gravely, stamps DENIED in her passport.

INT. HEATHROW AIRPORT - WAITING AREA - SAME

Akram, in tears, is talking on a pay phone.

INT. HEATHROW AIRPORT - WAITING AREA - LATER THAT DAY

Akram, Neda, and Mushalla, now a greying, sad older man, are sitting in the waiting room.

MASHALLA

Why didn't you tell me you were
going to leave Parviz and come
here?

AKRAM

I couldn't stay a minute longer. It
has been a nightmare. A terrible,
terrible nightmare that's lasted
eleven years.

Mashalla looks at his daughter with understanding in his eyes but something else on his mind.

MASHALLA

It's probably for the best, now
that there is so much unrest in our
country. I am sure they will try
and freeze my assets, in which case
I need you to go back to Iran and
secure our flats as well as the
money. You can stay in the flat
near Moty.

AKRAM

You know what Parviz will do, don't
you?

Mashalla and Akram both look gravely at each other, then at Neda. Mashalla pulls Neda onto his lap.

MASHALLA

Whatever happens, do not call any
undue attention to yourself.

Akram comes closer and puts her head on his shoulder.

FADE INTO:

MONTAGE

EXT. TEHRAN AIRPORT IRAN - WINTER, 1979 - DAY

The mood is dark. An AIR FRANCE plane lands, blocking the IRAN AIR Griffin. The tarmac is heavy with Journalists, Military Men, Mullahs, watching intently as the AYATOLLAH KHOMENI emerges from the plane, returning from exile.

Outside the airport, massive CROWDS surround it.

MONTAGE CONTINUES

The Huma is gone and the light is harsh and grey.

-- Tehran is a Police state. The AMERICAN EMBASSY is under siege.

-- Women in chadors and burkas peer through curtained windows, bearded Men crowd the streets, carrying enormous pictures of the Ayatollah. The outdoor cafes are gone, holding hands is a crime.

--- The face of the Ayatollah looms out from billboards, a street sign is being changed from PAHLAVI STREET to DR. MOHAMMAD MOSSADEGH.

-- A raid takes place on a dinner party, the Men and Women arrested.

-- In a small, dimly lit house, a Man sits at a worn table with a small, poor family. The Father slides money and passports across to the Man who gestures towards the snow-topped mountains behind him. The Family follows his gaze, apprehension and fear in their eyes.

-- Night, silhouettes of furtive figures behind more and more dimly lit windows, great and small.

-- ZOOM on the majestic ALBORZ MOUNTAINS in the distance.

END MONTAGE

INT. AKRAM'S CITY APARTMENT - DAY

Akram is rapt, watching an Iranian Television report about the start of the Iran-Iraq war

The apartment is furnished with some of the elegant items we recognize from Mashalla's house, like the Persian Lovers rug and the white couch.

Outside we see the ravage of war taking its toll on the city.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - DAY

Parviz and Neda, now 10, are walking into Akram's apartment.

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT - SAME

Akram opens the door to Parviz and Neda.

PARVIZ
Your passport.

AKRAM
What makes you think I could leave
the country right now, Parviz?

PARVIZ
I wouldn't put anything past you.

Parviz holds out his hand. Impatiently Akram slaps the passport into it, Parviz kisses Neda on the head before she runs to her mother's arms.

Akram closes the door behind Parviz.

AKRAM
Darling girl. What would you like
to do?

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT - KITCHEN - SAME

Akram and Neda are in the kitchen baking when an AIR RAID SIREN GOES OFF.

INT. BOILER ROOM - SAME

Akram and Neda, Moty, her husband MAHMOUD, 40's, and a few other relatives, run into the basement and open the door to the boiler room. A large heating unit is in the center. They flatten themselves against the shaking heater, their arms embracing it as bombs go off outside. Akram tries to comfort Neda as best she can.

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akram and Neda are in bed, Neda asleep, Akram wide awake. In BG, we can HEAR GUNSHOTS and YELLING. Akram looks over at Neda, strokes her forehead.

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT - DAY

Akram and Neda are at the window, Parviz is on the street outside. Neda starts to cry.

NEDA

Maman! I don't want to leave! I
don't want to go back to Baba-
Parviz.

AKRAM

I know, my sweet one. I know.

Akram gets down on her knees to look at Neda in the face.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

I'll ask him if you can stay an
extra day, shall I?

Neda smiles through her tears, nods emphatically yes. Akram goes to the window and opens it, leans out.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Parviz! Wait! Please let Neda stay
another day. She wants to so badly.

EXT. STREET - SAME

Parviz at the entrance, he looks up when he hears Akram.

PARVIZ

No.

He disappears into the building.

INT. AKRAM'S CITY APARTMENT - SAME

Akram and Neda look at each other and Neda starts to cry again. Akram picks her up, kisses her. There is a knock. Akram takes Neda to the door and opens it to an angry Parviz.

He tosses something on the floor behind Akram.

PARVIZ

Here's your passport. Come along,
Neda.

AKRAM

Please, Parviz. Just one more day.
Can't you see she doesn't want to
go?

Parviz holds his arms out to Neda.

PARVIZ

She wants to be with me.

Parviz grabs the child's arm. Akram jerks her away.

AKRAM

She said she wants to be with me!

Parviz grabs Neda where he can and starts to pull on her.

PARVIZ

She wants to be with me. And if she
had her way she'd never want to see
you again.

AKRAM

That is not true! Neda!

A push and pull ensues with Akram and Parviz, yelling protestations and cries from all three. Neda is in tears.

Akram stops suddenly and looks up.

AKRAM'S FLASHBACK

She's 18 months old and her uncle Mustafa throws her down the stairs. Batool and Shamsi fight over her. Shamsi lets go and looks at her hands, looks back up at Akram, cries.

BACK TO SHOT

Akram lets go of Neda who falls into her father's arms.

Akram is in shock as Parviz grabs the child, picks her up, and walks quickly down the hall.

Neda pleads with her arms and tear drenched eyes back toward Akram who is standing in the hall, crying as she watches Neda and Parviz disappear down the stairs.

AKRAM (V.O.)

It was at that moment I decided I had to do something. I wasn't sure what, but whatever it was, I would need money.

INT. TEHRAN BANK - DAY

Akram and Moty enter the bank and approach the teller window. She slides a piece of paper towards the Teller, the Teller shakes his head no, pushes it back.

TELLER

What makes you think we have that kind of cash? The revolution is expensive.

AKRAM

Perhaps, but you're not going to use my father's money to pay for it. Are you?

The Teller smiles curtly.

TELLER

Even if we had that kind of money, you would need to get the signature notarized.

Akram takes the paper and she and Moty leave the bank.

INT. AKRAM'S CITY APARTMENT - DAY

Akram and Moty are sitting on the sofa, having tea.

MOTY

Now what?

AKRAM

We find someone who can forge a notary signature.

MOTY

But the bank said they don't have money.

AKRAM

And you believe them?

Suddenly the PHONE RINGS. They look at each other in surprise, Akram answers.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Hello?... Yes, hello! Mrs.
Kamali.... I'm not doing too
well... Of course, I'm here now if
you'd like to come over... Fine,
see you in an hour.

Akram hangs up and looks at Moty.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

Mrs. Kamali has something she wasn't
to ask me.

INT. AKRAM'S CITY APARTMENT - SAME

Akram opens the door to Mrs. Kamali who steps in wearing a black coat and immediately removing herself of the black scarf covering her head.

MRS. KAMALI

Bloody thing. It's terrible, don't
you think, to have to hide this
gorgeous head of hair?

She smiles at Akram who hugs her heartily.

AKRAM

Welcome. Can I offer you some tea?
Pastry?

MRS. KAMALI

No, no, no... I can't stay long. I
just need to ask a favor.

Akram leads Mrs. Kamali to the sitting area, Mashalla's beautiful Persian rug beneath their feet.

AKRAM

Ask away.

MRS. KAMALI

Are you absolutely, one hundred
percent sure you and Parviz won't
be getting back together?

AKRAM

Oh yes, I'm absolutely sure.

MRS. KAMALI

Good, because I would like to introduce him to a lonely friend of mine.

AKRAM

By all means, do it! Maybe he'll stop focusing on me so much then.

MRS. KAMALI

Well, then it's settled. Now tell me, how are you?

AKRAM

Me? I'm going crazy and want to get me and Neda out of here, but I don't know how.

MRS. KAMALI

Oh, is that all?

Mrs. Kamali's face grows serious.

MRS. KAMALI (CONT'D)

Akram, the Ayatollah and his cronies won't last long. We Persians are far too civilized for that. But you aren't the only one who doesn't have time to wait to find out and I can understand it.

AKRAM

You can?

MRS. KAMALI

Of course I can. In fact, there are groups of people at this very moment who are planning escapes by various means all over the country.

AKRAM

How can I get in touch with one of these groups?

Mrs. Kamali takes Akram's hands.

MRS. KAMALI

I have accrued many contacts with diverse people through my work as a journalist, some of whom are able to help with things of this nature.

(MORE)

MRS. KAMALI (CONT'D)

In fact, I've organized a small group of people myself who are travelling across the border into Spain via Turkey in two weeks time.

AKRAM

Really? Can you take me and Neda?

Mrs. Kamali smiles at her earnestly.

MRS. KAMALI

I can take you, if you're absolutely sure it's what you want to do but I will tell you now, it's extremely dangerous, Akram. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that.

AKRAM

You said you can take me. But what about Neda?

MRS. KAMALI

I personally can not advocate it. But what I can do is recommend you go first, then, if you make it and decide it's something you want put her Neda, they can go back and get her.

Akram gets up, goes to the window, looks out onto the war torn city.

AKRAM

When do you need to know my decision?

MRS. KAMALI

As soon as possible.

INT. AKRAM'S CITY APARTMENT - THE NEXT DAY

Furniture covered in sheets, a few rolled up rugs, some stacked boxes, and a painting wrapped in brown paper are in the center of the room.

Akram rolls up her father's Rumi rug, seals it with plastic, then stuffs it into a canvas duffle bag.

She goes to a table and removes her Rolex, putting it on the table next to her passport, an envelope, and a small, flat box. She counts the bills in the envelope one last time.

She then puts the Rolex in the little box with other pieces of jewelry. She takes the envelope, the box, and the passport and puts the items in a bag, closing it tight.

EXT. AKRAM'S STREET - NIGHT

It's quiet on Akram's street, except for the faint SOUND of an American POP SONG wafting in from one of the apartments.

EXT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT - SAME

From the street we see Akram's drapes part, she peeks out.

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT - SAME

Akram, at the window, in her dressing gown. She sees a Jeep and four motorcycles scream around the corner and stop in front of a building on the opposite side of the street.

She quickly closes the drapes and walks to the front door.

INT. PARTY APARTMENT - SAME

A house party is in full swing. The Men are dressed in casual clothes, Women in the latest fashions; short skirts, low necklines, lots of makeup, and high heels. Not a chador or hijab to be seen. Everyone's dancing, drinking, smoking.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - SAME

Several bearded young Men storm into the apartment building.

INT. PARTY APARTMENT - SAME

Back to the party. A champagne cork goes flying.

Suddenly the door opens. It's a raid. The Ayatollah's 'Basiji' have come to break up the party.

People scatter, jumping out windows, running out the door, fleeing. Some are caught, others disappear into the night.

INT. MOTY'S APARTMENT - SAME

KNOCKING. Moty opens the door, pulling on her robe. She opens the door to Akram who rushes inside. She closes the door behind Akram and into the modestly furnished apartment.

MOTY

Akram, why aren't you asleep? You have an early start tomorrow.

Akram grabs onto Moty's robe, near tears.

AKRAM

I couldn't fall asleep... Then I heard them... across the street. Oh my God, what if they come into my flat? They'll know immediately! Moty! What am I going to do?

MOTY

They're not looking for you, Akram. They're looking for infidels!

Tears are starting to well up.

AKRAM

But Moty...

Moty goes to the window and looks out onto the street.

MOTY

Akram, don't worry. They will be too busy pouring out alcohol and destroying Western movie tapes to come here.

Moty struggles to keep her cool.

AKRAM

But they'll be looking everywhere on our street!

Moty's husband Mahmoud comes squinting out of the bedroom, wrapping a robe around his ample belly and smoothing down some nonexistent hair on the top of his head.

MAHMOUD

What's going on?

Mahmoud puts on thick glasses, now able to see.

MOTY

The Basiiji are breaking up a party across the street.

MAHMOUD

They ought to be ashamed.

Suddenly there's LOUD BANGING on the glass that separates the balcony from the house.

AKRAM

Don't open it!

Mahmoud peeks through the drapes then opens them to reveal three young WOMEN, about 20 years old, looking like wild animals caught in a cage. They plead through the glass.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - SAME

There is now a police van in front of the house. Two POLICE OFFICERS are escorting a group of Men and Women into the van.

Basiji are throwing a satellite dish, some movie tapes, Western magazines, etc... out the window and carrying full bottles of alcohol out the front door.

INT. MOTY'S APARTMENT - SAME

MOTY

Mahmoud... Let them in.

AKRAM

Are you crazy? It could be a trap!

Mahmoud is about to open the door.

MAHMOUD

Moty and I are not the ones fleeing the country tomorrow, Akram, we have nothing to be paranoid about.

Mahmoud opens the door and the Women fall into the apartment.

All of them are in varying forms of disarray; to bleeding knees, torn stockings, scratched faces, running mascara. The two older Girls are comforting the younger one.

MOTY

Akram, get some warm towels and bandages.

Akram is startled out of her reverie.

MOTY (CONT'D)

Akram! Go!

Akram returns with some water and towels and bandages and they dress their wounds. The girls sit on the sofa, the floor, anywhere they find room.

MAHMOUD

You girls need to get home.

They start to panic, become excited.

MAHMOUD (CONT'D)
Don't worry. I will drive you.

Everyone looks at Mahmoud in surprise.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - SAME

Mahmoud is by the open trunk of a white Paykan car parked next to the metal trellis that reaches up to the top of the building. All three of the Girls are squeezing into the trunk. Mahmoud closes it when they're in.

Before he can get into the car, two young Basiji with beards approach.

BASIJI 1
Good evening, brother.

MAHMOUD
Good evening. Can I help you,
brother?

Basiji 1 points toward the apartment across the road.

BASIJI 1
We are looking for the people who
escaped from a party across the
road. Did you see anyone around
here just now?

MAHMOUD
Me? No.

BASIJI 2
Where are you going this time of
night? There is a curfew, you know?

MAHMOUD
Yes, I know. I'm just going to see
my mother. I received a call that
she has fallen ill.

BASIJI 1
I see. Well, don't let us keep you.
Allahu Akbar.

MAHMOUD
Allahu Akbar.

Basiji 1 gives a nod and they go.

Relieved, Mahmoud gets into the car and drives off slowly.

INT. AKRAM'S APARTMENT BEDROOM - DAY

MOTY (O.C.)
Akram! Akram, wake up!

Akram is asleep in bed. Moty is standing next to her, a hand on Akram's shoulder, gently moving her from side to side.

MOTY (CONT'D)
Wake up! Akram! You need to get up.

Akram's eyes open, she is disoriented, she sits up.

AKRAM
What time is it?

MOTY
You have one hour.

Moty sits down next to her.

MOTY (CONT'D)
Are you sure you want to go through
with this? There is still time to
change your mind.

Akram gets out of bed.

MOTY (CONT'D)
If I don't go today, I never will.
And Neda will be stuck here for the
rest of her life.

She begins to dress, Moty helps her gather her things.

EXT. TEHRAN STREET - DAY

Akram is walking down the street, looking down, trying not to attract attention. She has the duffle bag with the rug in it, another bag over her shoulder, and carries a small suitcase.

Akram arrives at a bus stop, stopping at the back of the line where a woman in a chador stands next to a strapping young man of 24, a beat up travel bag hangs on his shoulder. This is SHAPUR.

The woman next to Akram turns to her. It's Mrs. Kamali. She speaks to Akram as if they were discussing the weather.

MRS. KAMALI
Do you have everything?

Akram nods, then indicates the rug in the duffle bag.

AKRAM
The most important thing is this rug. It's very valuable and my father will kill me if it doesn't make it.

MRS. KAMALI
I'd be happy if that was the only thing you lost during the trip. Now, the last stop on the bus will be Tabriz. It will take about 6 hours to arrive. There, you will wait for further instructions. We have three stops before that. At the first one, we will get off the bus and rest. There, I will leave you. Ah, here comes Manoucher.

We see Manoucher, the man standing next to Akram on the mountain ridge, walk toward the bus stop. He smiles curtly and nonchalantly stands behind Akram.

Mrs. Kamali hands a paper to Manoucher and he stuffs it in his pocket.

MRS. KAMALI (CONT'D)
Akram this is Manoucher. Congratulations, here is your marriage certificate, the two of you are now man and wife. If anyone asks, you are on your way to a family gathering in Tabriz.

Akram smiles shyly and Manoucher looks as if he isn't too upset about the idea of being 'married' to Akram.

Shapur, a dazed look in his eye, turns to Mrs. Kamali.

MRS. KAMALI (CONT'D)
This is Shapur.

They nod at each other. The bus opens its doors, it's time to board.

INT. BUS - SAME

They enter and find seats near each other, Akram sitting next to a window. All of their bags are put above them.

Suddenly Mrs. Kamali and Shapur stand. Mrs. Kamali turns to Akram. She does not look happy.

MRS. KAMALI

Shapur forgot something. We'll take
the next bus and meet you in
Quazvin.

They quickly leave the bus, leaving behind Shapur's bag.

And the bus takes off, leaving the war-torn city.

SEQUENCE OF VARIOUS STREET SCENES SEEN FROM AKRAM'S POV:

-- An entire brick wall has the words DEATH TO AMERICA
scrawled across it.

-- A five foot tall image of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

-- A huge billboard of a woman wearing a hijab with the
words: HIJAB IS A WOMAN'S HONOR. ANIMALS ARE NAKED. A WOMAN
WITHOUT A HIJAB IS AN ANIMAL.

-- The impoverished neighborhoods of Southern Tehran.

-- A Man on a ladder changing a street sign.

EXT. QAZVIN BUS STOP - DAY

Desert terrain, a lone cafe. The bus stops and the people
disembark. It's starting to snow.

A large, handsome man named AZAD, 40's, steps out of the
cafe, greeting everyone who comes off the bus. He has a warm
and welcoming demeanor.

Several of the passengers file inside, as do Akram and
Manoucher. They leave their things.

INT. BUS STOP CAFE - SAME

Akram and Manoucher sit at a table. Azad approaches. They
order tea, he nods, smiles, goes off.

AKRAM

Why do you think they left without
Shapur's bag?

MANOUCHER

I don't know, but I don't like it.

Azad comes back with the tea and leans over the table.

AZAD

When you're done, please take your
things off the bus and go through
the kitchen to the back.

Akram and Manoucher look at each other, confused.

INT. BUS - SAME

The bags are where they left them. Manoucher enters the bus and is about to take theirs when he spots Shapur's. Unsure of what to do with it, he looks inside.

Some clothes and not much else, he digs around some more and pulls out a plastic bag. There are the utensils for shooting heroin and a large baggie of the brown powder.

MANOUCHER

That little shit.

Manoucher closes the bag, thinks. He takes all of their things, even Shapur's bag, and gets off the bus.

EXT. CAFE` - SAME

Azad is digging a hole, Akram and Manoucher are next to him.

AZAD

Daran is unable to take you to
Tabriz today. There is terrible
fighting all over the border. You
must keep your clothes, but the
other items, you need to bury here.

Akram isn't sure what to do, she looks at Manoucher, he puts an arm around her.

AKRAM

Excuse me, but these items... they
are extremely...

Manoucher looks at Akram, gestures for her to be quiet.

MANOUCHER

I'm not sure leaving these items
buried in a hole in the ground is
going to give this woman a very
strong sense of security.

Azad stops digging, turns and faces them earnestly.

AZAD

Unless you want to turn back, there is no other choice. You will be met in Turkey with your valuables and passports. But for now you have to trust me that right here, behind this cafe, is the safest place in the world for your items.

Azad resumes digging and Akram sits down on the ground, watching him finish. He tosses Shapur's bag in then puts Akram's valuables on top and covers it with soil.

TWO WEEKS LATER

INT. BACK ROOM AT THE CAFE - NIGHT

Akram, Manoucher, and 35 SMUGGLERS of varying ages, religions, and heritage are all in this large room. Weathered faces and hardened eyes.

Akram is the only woman. Manoucher stays close to her side.

Some are sleeping, some are cleaning their weapons. Others are eating, some are passing the time by playing cards.

AKRAM

Why are you going to America, Manoucher?

MANOUCHER

I have a kidney disorder and there is a specialist doctor in California I am going to see.

AKRAM

I'm going to California, too. I have relatives there.

They exchange smiles.

INT. CAFE - DAY

Azad brings an armful of clothes for Akram and Manoucher. Layers of sweaters, etc, for the two of them, a Kurdish jacket for Akram, woolen hats.

AZAD

Tomorrow you will head into the mountains with an able man called Daran and his men.

(MORE)

AZAD (CONT'D)

There you will camp and wait until the right time to cross the border into Turkey. You will travel at night and rest by day.

AKRAM

Where are the other people in our party? We've been here two weeks and they haven't returned yet.

AZAD

Maybe they heard of the delay and decided to stay in Tehran. I wouldn't be too concerned with what they are doing, however. Take care of yourselves now. May Allah guide you and keep you safe.

And with that he takes his leave.

SERIES OF SHOTS - THE MOUNTAIN ESCAPE

-- DUSK. Akram, in her layers, and Manoucher, climb into the back of a pickup truck with 3 other Men. Daran with 2 other Smugglers including the Young Smuggler, jump into the back of the truck with them and they off down the road.

-- NIGHT. On a mountain road, the truck is barreling along. The tires slip, PANIC... The truck reels, gets back on the road. RELIEF.

-- NIGHT. Later. Two red lights can be seen in the near distance. The Smugglers grip their guns more tightly. Akram and Manoucher huddle closer together. The red lights turn out to be a tractor. Relief.

-- NIGHT. The truck ascends higher into the mountains.

-- DAYBREAK. They arrive at a barn in the middle of a mountain village. They disembark, go into the barn.

-- DAY. Sleeping on piles of hay, Akram, Manoucher, and some of the Smugglers rest up for the night of travel.

-- DUSK. Akram and the others are gathered around a small campfire. They all look more and more wrecked. Daran approaches.

DARAN

Tonight we leave on horseback to the next safe house.

AKRAM

Horses?

Daran looks at Akram.

DARAN

Is there a problem?

AKRAM

Only if never having ridden a horse
is a problem.

DARAN

You'll be fine. It's just like
riding a bike.

Daran smiles, then he and the Young Smuggler walk off.

DARAN (CONT'D)

(to Young Smuggler)

Make sure she rides behind me.

-- NIGHT. Moonlight shines on Daran, Akram, Manoucher, and the other 5 Men in a single file line on horseback. Akram is unsure on the horse. The HOWLING of WOLVES can be heard. Akram's face is ashen with fear, her lips chapped.

-- NIGHT. LATER. Suddenly a WOLF shoots out from the brush and Akram's horse REARS UP. She falls and tumbles down the hill like a rag doll. The horses stop. Manoucher jumps off his horse.

MANOUCHER

Get her!

There is momentary confusion. The Young Smuggler starts to go down the hill, Daran pulls him back. Manoucher confronts Daran. Daran gives in, the Young Smuggler heads down the hill. Nervously they wait.

Moments later the Young Smuggler appears with an unconscious Akram over his shoulder. Manoucher checks her vital signs.

MANOUCHER (CONT'D)

She's alive!

-- DAYBREAK. The horses are reaching their last safe house, Akram has been secured to the back of her horse and is between the Young Smuggler and Manoucher.

-- DAY. Inside a cave in the mountains, a small fire is lit, everyone is sitting around it. The Young Smuggler rubs Akram's feet at the fire to thaw her out.

Manoucher treats the wounds on her face. She is unconscious. They eat soup and bread.

-- DAY. Akram dreams a terrible dream. Someone gives her water, she coughs, falls back asleep. Tosses, turns.

AKRAM

Neda... Please forgive me, Neda...

-- DAY. Outside the cave, Manoucher and Daran are having a conversation.

DARAN

There's been a plane crash.
Everyone in the aircraft was
killed, including the Algerian
Minister of Foreign Affairs. Soon
there will be all kinds of people
coming to investigate. We have to
leave. Now.

MANOUCHER

I don't think she can.

DARAN

She has no choice.

With that Daran walks off.

-- DAY. The Group is back on horseback, Akram weak but holding on. The horse in front of her slips, gains its footing. She gasps.

-- NIGHT. A TRUCK is seen in front of the Group, the two headlights blinding everyone. They stop. The Truck stops. The Smugglers get off the horses.

DARAN (CONT'D)

Keep still.

Daran and two of the Smugglers walk toward the truck. Two Men get out of the truck and approach Daran. A brief standoff. Daran lifts his gun and shoots the two Men dead. The Young Smuggler drives the truck backwards so the group can go forward, gets out of the truck, and gets back on his horse. The Group continue on their way. Akram and Manoucher are speechless. They press on.

-- DAYBREAK. The 8 Travelers have made it to the top of a ridge, watching a magnificent sunrise.

DARAN (CONT'D)

Down there is Turkey. At the border
I will give you your passports and
traveling money. And in Istanbul
Hussein will give you everything
else. Please say your good-byes.

Akram turns to look at Iran one more time before they
descend, sadness and fear overcoming her.

AKRAM

I promised Neda I would come back
and get her.

MANOUCHER

You will.

Akram takes one more look, then disappears with the group as
they continue on their way down the mountain and into Turkey.

FADE INTO:

INT. HOTEL IN ISTANBUL - DAY

Akram, showered and dressed but still showing signs of her
recent ordeal, is sitting on the bed, the spectacular skyline
of Istanbul behind her. Manoucher's clothes are on a chair.

Akram reacts to something she hears. She goes to the door and
opens it to Azad, wearing a white linen suit. He has a bag
over one shoulder and Akram's duffel bag on the other. He
enters and she closes the door behind him. He smiles, hands
Akram the bag.

Akram takes the bag and looks inside briefly. Tears well up.
She quickly unrolls the duffel bag and takes out her father's
precious rug. She sets it lovingly down on the bed then Akram
throws her arms around Azad. She quickly catches herself. An
awkward moment.

Akram and Azad smile at each other as Manoucher comes out of
the bathroom. Smiling, Azad stands, the men shake hands.

CUT TO:

INT. NEDA'S HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Neda, dressed to leave, a packed bag on the bed, is sitting
at the small table with Akram.

AKRAM

Once we arrived and Azad gave me my father's rug in one beautiful piece, I decided to ask them to go back and get you.

NEDA

But they never did.

AKRAM

The smugglers were caught and killed before they could make it. Your father, of course, had the right to keep you so there was nothing else I could do after that except write and call and try and stay in contact as best I could.

Akram takes Neda's hands.

AKRAM (CONT'D)

You have to believe me, Neda. I've only ever had your best interest at heart, however misguided my actions might have looked on the outside.

NEDA

I understand why you did what you did, Madaar. I just don't understand everyone else. But I will try my best to let go of the past and move on.

AKRAM

Maybe now we both can.

Akram and Neda smile at each other as the little grey bird outside flies off into the blue sky, transforming into the great Huma and...

FADING INTO:

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO BAY - EARLY MORNING

The Huma swoops down across the water and breaks apart into the FIVE LETTERS that slowly form the word KARMA.

THE END