

What The Doves Said: The Secret

Our guests – let's call them Peter and Susan - are discussing one of the artworks in our living room. It is a safe topic considering we have been friends only for a short time and this is only their first visit to our house. My husband has just started to tell them about the painting's origin when the phone rings.

"Excuse me." I pick up the phone and walk towards the kitchen as to not interrupt the discussion.

My conversation is taking a bit longer than expected, so as it is ending, I walk back into the living room, cover the mouthpiece with my hand and say in a low voice:

"Sorry, it's long distance. My b-r-o-t-h-e-r."

The minute the words "my brother" come out of my mouth, I desperately want to take them back, but it is too late. Our guests' expressions say it loud and clear - an accusative gaze, bordering on a hostile stare. Susan's eyes – she likes to be called Sue -- are tightened at the corners and an angry frown forms rapidly on her forehead. "How dare you?" she probably wants to shout. But perhaps I am exaggerating and projecting from my past experiences, I tell myself.

It is my own fault. Why did I spit out what was in my head without considering the consequences?

"*Zaban-e sorkh, sar-e sabz midahad bar baad,*" Mom says as she passes me by and disappears into the kitchen. Her saying roughly translates to "a red tongue will destroy a healthy head." It is a line from a poem that is more like a life lesson. A man opens his mouth, volunteers more information than needed to the king without thinking about the consequences, and ... gets himself killed.

I've had this bad habit since childhood. No matter how hard my dad tried, he could not get me to be patient and think first before opening my mouth. Now, once again, I have gotten myself into an uncomfortable situation to say the least.

Maybe they didn't hear me? I desperately want to believe.

I look at my husband, hoping for a confirmation as I hang up the phone after rushing a good bye. He is puzzled

as to why I have opened my Pandora box this early in a relationship – that makes two of us!

“But I thought you’d said you were an only child,” Sue says with wide eyes.

To set the record straight, I never say I am an only child. I am very careful not to lie. I usually say that I was *raised* as an only child. There is a difference – at least in my mind. But people hear what they want to hear and not what is actually said.

“Well, I was raised as an only child by my aunt and uncle, *Ashraf* and *Javad*, who didn’t have a child of their own,” I smile. “They begged my biological parents, *Sima* and *Nader* for me – to raise me, that is. I do have six siblings but I didn’t grow up with them.” I say all of this slowly giving them time to digest.

I watch my guests’ expressions change from suggesting “What a liar!” to “Oh, you poor thing!” - exactly the opposite of what I hoped to convey. This is why I don’t tell people this little trivia about myself until I feel very close to them, and they can clearly see that I am anything but “a poor thing.”

You would think that nowadays, with all the local and global adoptions, artificial inseminations, surrogate mothers, and online babies (seriously, that one is coming soon) people would be more open to hearing about a simple “keep it in the family” pseudo-adoption – I say “pseudo” because I was not legally adopted. The grownups thought that was unnecessary and since both my dads had the same family name – they were related – then a legal adoption was not needed.

Besides, adoption in our culture, at least in those days, was usually reserved for kids who didn’t have families. In a way “adoption” could have translated into “this kid is not wanted” which was not true in my case. Another reason the grownups didn’t make my adoption legal, according to my birthmother, was that my biological parents insisted on having the option of taking me back should things not work out the way they had expected. In a strange way, which I know is incomprehensible to most people, not legalizing my adoption was an act of respect and ultimate love for me.

“Oh, really? Was your mother very young? Were you her first child?” questions are flying from Sue’s mouth like torpedoes.

“No, I was not the first child.” What I really want to say is, “Sorry to disappoint you. I am NOT a lovechild!”

I want to escape into the kitchen and ask Mom to tell me the story of the man with the red tongue again. I have forgotten the details. But it would be impolite to leave my guests again, especially now when they are asking questions.

“Don't worry about what others say or think,” Mom says as she emerges from the kitchen and sits next to me. Whenever I think of her or need her she appears.

“Then you must have been the last child?” Sue asks. Meaning you must have been extra, unwanted.

Part of me wants to tell them my entire story at once and get it over with while the other part, the mischievous side, wants to prolong the suspense. If I am about to spill out my guts to strangers, then I might as well have a little fun.

“Nope. I am the middle child,” I say with a grin. I know this bit gets to people.

“But you were and always will be our *yeki-yek dooneh*,” Mom whispers in my ear. She is calling me “the one and only,” a term of endearment.

This game, the one Sue and Peter are playing with me now, is turning out to be the exact replica of the games I have previously played with other people. People are alike, despite wanting and claiming to be unique – I find most to be close-minded.

“Well, my aunt and uncle pleaded my biological parents to take the baby home every time they had a newborn.” I know how bad this must sound but I don't know how else to say it.” But my biological parents, *Sima* and *Nader*, wouldn't agree to part with their babies for a long time.

“Then somehow, amazingly, when I was born, my biological parents were susceptible to the idea of having me live with my aunt and uncle, *Ashraf* and *Javad*. But it took a long time. I was five and half months old when I finally went to my new parents' home.”

That look is back on my guests' faces. For a while they were just surprised and now they are feeling sorry for

me again. I don't understand why it is so hard to understand that I feel lucky to have been the chosen one?

"So they agreed to the adoption?"

"Adoption! As if you were *sar-e rahi*!" Mom is outraged. *Sar-e rahi* means unwanted child – like the babies left on a doorstep for someone else to take care of.

"Wait, Mom, I am about to explain," I tell her in the language of the eyes, the ones we both speak well.

What my guests would rather ask is "What kind of parents give their child away and then have more kids?"

I never cared enough to ask this question. However, my lack of interest didn't stop my biological mother from telling me over and over that it was supposed to be a temporary situation. *Sima* insists that they were going to bring me back home. I am fine with her version of the story – I am fine with any version of this story as long as I end up with my aunt, *Ashraf*, who became my real Mom, who sits guardedly by me now.

My birthmother worked full time and by the time I was born she had a few kids already. My adoptive mom – that is my aunt *Ashraf*, who liked to be called *Azam* - didn't work, had no kids, and had domestic help. My adoptive dad – that is my uncle *Javad* - had taken early retirement due to political reasons, and had lots of free time. Additionally, my grandmother and uncle lived upstairs from us. In short, with four grownups around ready to help raise me, I would be in an ideal situation. Honestly, I can't be more grateful to my biological parents for their unselfishness.

"Yes, luckily for me. I was the one who won the jackpot. I grew up like a princess," I say, knowing full well that our guests will not remember this part of my story.

"That was the best thing that happened to me," Mom says as she strokes my hair. "I had lost hope of becoming a mother. *Sima* has a great heart. She is a kind person." Mom never stops reminding me.

"So did you know all along?" Sue asks with a long face.

"No, I found out when I was in the third grade." I know what I am about to say will be another shocker so I pause a little. "I found out on my own, by chance."

"*Balla!*" Mom smiles and whispers into my ear. *Balla* means clever and naughty, a term of endearment Mom used often with me. In turn I used it with my son, enough for our cockatoo to pick up and repeat every time my son was near its cage.

"You did? How?" Sue almost screams.

"Well, my Mom – and when I say my Mom and Dad I mean my adoptive parents, *Azam* and *Javad* – loved to socialize. They used any excuse to get friends and family together and feed them – Mom was an amazing cook." I steal a quick glance at Mom and notice she is blushing from the compliment. The storyteller in me has taken over now and has little concern about the impatient look in my audience's eyes with no interest in tiny details including as my mom's cooking.

"One Spring afternoon, when I was eight, we had ten or twelve adults and over a dozen kids at our house. My biological parents, who I knew as my aunt *Sima* and uncle *Nader*, were also there."

I pause to give my listeners a chance to take it all in. Most people have a hard time with the reverse roles I assign to my biological parents and my real parents.

"We had finished lunch and the grownups were sitting around the table sipping tea and talking while we kids were playing outside. We lived in a great house with a fabulous garden. I can't recall what game we were playing but I remember running around the garden for a long time before one of the kids announced he was thirsty. I offered to bring him a glass of water so he could continue the game."

"She wanted to be like her mom, the perfect hostess," my husband jumps in.

"Then what happened?" Sue asks, ignoring my husband.

"It's true, I adored my mom and wanted to be exactly like her." I smile at my husband. "Most kids want to be just like their parents. Didn't you?" I ask Sue. She shouldn't have ignored my husband – somehow, I seem to always be in teaching mode.

"All parents must adore their kids," Mom announces. I wonder if I learned being opinionated from her.

"Yes, of course, but that's not important. You were telling us how you found out about..." Sue replies.

"Oh, yes. Now, where was I?"

"The garden, getting a glass of water for the boy," Sue offers impatiently and I realize I must have a captive audience.

"Yes, so I headed back toward the house to get some water. I decided to take a shortcut to the dining room so instead of the main entrance, I used the porch."

I pause to create a bit of suspense – if I tell the story for the 100th time, then I should at least use it as a practice round to improve my storytelling skills!

"Once I got to the dining room and right before reaching for the handle, I heard my aunt *Sima* saying: 'I gave birth to *Mojdeh* after *Pirooz*.'"

The couple is looking at me with wide eyes.

"We should have told you sooner," Mom says as she puts her arms around me. "This was not how I wanted you to find out. But we kept putting it off. I suppose we were not sure how you would react."

"You know I am not upset about that. Besides, by letting me find out on my own you have made tonight's entertainment possible!" I wink at Mom and say in my heart, knowing well Mom can hear me.

I should stop having side conversations with Mom. My guests already think I am strange without realizing I am communicating with my Mom who has been gone now for six years.

"If I didn't know who *Pirooz* was, I might have doubted hearing my own name. But I knew that name well. He was one of my uncle *Nader's* kids. A happy baby who was very smart, strong, big, and tall for his age. Sadly, he got sick and died before reaching his first birthday."

My guests look impatient. Obviously, they don't have as much sympathy for *Pirooz* as I do.

"*Pirooz's* name came up often in our house. After more than a decade everyone, especially my grandma, still talked about him and what an exceptional baby he was. Anyhow, I was not sure what to make of what

I had heard.”

“He was a beautiful boy. It is such a pity he got sick,” Mom chimes in.

“Oh, you poor thing! What did you do?” Sue says.

“Nothing!” I show my teeth, hoping to convey victory for not needing their sympathy, and my pride for reinforcing the message that I am not a *poor thing*, not even as I was standing by the dining room door, trying to digest that I may not be my parents’ real child. “I didn’t want everyone to know that I had heard the secret. So I tiptoed away from the dining room door to the hallway and the main entrance as quietly and quickly as I could.”

“Really? You did that? I would’ve guessed you would throw a tantrum!” Sue almost screams. “And how old did you say you were then?” she continues with an accusing look.

“She mentioned she was in third grade,” Peter responds to his wife. “Or maybe I got that wrong?” I can hear skepticism in his voice. Everyone seems to have difficulty with my age in this story.

“Yes, I was eight. In fact, I’m very sure about the date because the party was for my mom’s return from the first of two trips she ever took without me,” I add.

“You were a smart girl, very mature for your age. We were so proud of you,” Mom says, patting me on the back.

Our guests are still not quite convinced. As irritated as I am, I don’t blame them. People often feel that I acted too mature and therefore doubt my recollection of the story’s timeline. What they don’t realize is that as an only child I was surrounded by grownups and therefore often behaved older than my age.

“Any kid that age, or even older, would have thrown a tantrum, for sure,” Sue suggests.

“I don’t think these people deserve your friendship. They don’t seem to get what an extraordinary child you were,” Mom says as she gets up. “I will be in the kitchen if you need me.”

Part of me is relieved Mom has left. I can focus on the story now without wondering what she will do or say.

Though to be honest it is me who seems to act up when she is around. It is as if I become like a little girl again – wanting to impress her and tease her at the same time. The first part, impressing Mom, has always been easy. She was always proud of me even for the simplest things I did. The second part was a bit harder. She was too clever to be teased easily.

“Even a grownup would have rushed into the room to find out the whole story,” Peter brings me back to the present.

“I know, but I don’t remember being devastated by what I had just heard. It must not have bothered me; at least not enough to keep me from going back to the other kids and having fun the rest of the day. As an only child, I cherished my time with other kids.”

“Maybe you didn’t believe your aunt?” Sue suggests.

“Perhaps.” I shrug my shoulders.

“Anyhow, I still wanted to get that glass of water I had come for. So I quietly left and re-enter the house via the main door again. This time I made sure to make some noise as a warning to the grownups. Then I finally managed to get that glass of water and took it back to the garden for my playmate.”

“Did you want water, sweetheart?” Mom is in the hallway with a glass of water, one of my grandmother’s old-fashioned glasses, the ones that really took care of your thirst. I loved them. They were big, thick, and somehow always cold. I laugh. “No, Mom.” I think Mom just wanted an excuse to come back. She must have been bored in the kitchen all by herself.

“You remembered the water?” Sue says and brings me again to my storytelling.

Somehow everyone seems to look at this incident with grown-up eyes and fails to understand that to a child, especially one who is treated like a princess, this incident was not as devastating as they might imagine. I was loved so dearly by my parents that it didn’t really matter how I got there, as long as I was assured I could stay.

“Most kids want to know about their real parents when they find out they are adopted.” Peter chimes in.

"True, but I already knew them. And... well, I didn't really like them much nor did I want to live in their house. We visited often." I am now worried that I may sound cold.

"My child? Cold? Never!" Mom cries, rolling her eyes as she comes and sits next to me again. "On the contrary, she has a heart of gold. We had to watch you all the time because you would get upset about every bit of injustice. We couldn't even take you shopping with us when you were young. You cried when you saw beggars, the disabled, and kids who had less than you. Oh, don't get me started."

Mom is right. I still remember crying when I encountered a woman near Tehran's main bazaar who was disabled and had to beg. I was three or four and was shopping with my parents. I broke down in tears as soon as I saw her crawling on all four. That scene is engraved into my memory and still makes me sad.

"How come?" Sue wants to know why I didn't like my birthparents much.

"Well, my biological mother, *Sima*, was just the opposite of my Mom. She was bossy, had a temper, and was very intense. I don't think I had ever seen her smile. Aunt *Sima* seemed intimidating to me and I had never felt comfortable around her."

I am not sure if Sue's arched eyebrows are for my birthmother's behavior or for mine?

"My biological dad, *Nader*, I sort of liked. He seemed to balance out his wife. He was calm, humorous, and kind. And he was the one who would bring my cousin, *Amin*, (who I now know was actually my brother) to our house for sleepovers. I loved my cousin and really enjoyed playing with him. *Amin* was only one and a half years younger than me and the two of us were very compatible when it came to being *shaytoon*, as my grandma used to call us!"

"*Shay*—what?" Sue asks.

"*Shaytoon*. It's a term of endearment that is difficult to translate. It can mean super active, clever, and naughty but it is not a negative attribute. *Amin* and I caused a lot of trouble but my mom believed *shaytoon* kids were healthy kids and never punished us for our mischiefs."

I am digressing. It is so easy to do that when I am talking about my mom. She was so amazing that every time

her name comes up I can think of a ton of good memories to share. I look at Mom sitting next to me and smile, the way that only she can see.

“And my aunt and uncle’s house was very different than ours. It was busy, unorganized, and crowded. Though I have to admit it was entertaining at times.”

“How strange! You just forgot about the whole thing?” I hope Sue does not think I am cold and selfish.

“No, not really.” Between being cold and selfish or poor little thing, I have to admit I like the latter better.

“I waited till all our guests left. When Mom came to tuck me in and kiss me goodnight, I asked her about it.”

“I remember that night. My sweet, mature, yet young child,” Mom says with wet eyes.

“You did? Just like that?” Both guests now have wide eyes.

“Yes, of course. I was only eight. Mom was everything to me and had all the answers.”

“What did she say to you?” Sue is about to jump out of her seat.

“Mom never lied. So she confirmed that what I had heard was true,” I say and then pause for a moment. I know all this is not that easy to grasp.

“Mom said that they didn’t have a kid and wanted one desperately. They begged and begged my biological parents to give me to them. They asked many times themselves then had friends and family elders ask on their behalf. They made a thousand promises to take great care of me. They implored until my biological parents finally agreed. My Mom then kissed me goodnight and said that was the best day of her life and that I was the best thing that had ever happened to them.”

When I had arrived Mom was beside herself. What she didn’t know was that my Dad had appealed to my biological parents many more times until he won them over. Dad had promised that they could take me back if they didn’t feel I was being taken care of properly. He reminded them that my older brother, the one who was on the phone earlier this evening, spent most of his time at their house with *Azam* and *Javad*. Dad was

also quick to make a nursery for me. In fact he had come home with a beautiful brass crib the same day that I had arrived. Mom had wondered if he knew ahead of time that I would arrive and therefore had found the perfect crib for me in such a short time. Dad felt the sooner they made a home for me, the less chance there would be for *Sima* and *Nader* to take me back.

“How did you know about that?” Mom asks.

I take in the astonishment on my guests’ faces, and Mom’s. This is my prize.

“I fell asleep soon after. I didn’t bring the matter up again.”

“You didn’t ask again or want to spend time with your biological parents?” Sue must have forgotten that we had already talked about this.

“Well, no. I think subconsciously I was afraid that if my birthparents found out I knew then they might want to take me back. I was safe as long as I pretended I didn’t know. This was, of course, all in my head but I felt this was our secret – my mom’s and mine.”

I turn to Mom but she has disappeared. I never understand why she leaves. I know she appears if I call her and sometimes at odd times. But I don’t know what makes her leave.

“So you never talked about it again?” I am grateful to Sue for being such a great listener and keeping me focused.

“Not for a long time. When I was older, years later, Mom would bring it up as a sort of historical fact. She would tell the story of the day I was brought to them, how surprised she was. This was a great memory, which she enjoyed revisiting often.”

It is difficult for others to understand how I can be so coolheaded about being “adopted” by my aunt and uncle. Some have a harder time with my extended family (uncle and grandmother) living upstairs from us. I, however, loved that – being cared for by four loving grownups. When my parents were taking a nap in the afternoon – I never liked taking naps, even as a child - I ran upstairs to my uncle who told me stories and played games with me. My grandmother was the best grandma in the world. She called me princess and made

me the number one priority in her life. She also entertained me lovingly with amazing stories and games that only she knew how to play while my parents were not home. I couldn't have asked for a better childhood. In fact I would give anything to re-live those years.

People from older civilizations, such as my Indian or Chinese friends, have a much easier time with my story. Sometimes they even trade a similar story with me – whether from their own lives or others close to them. An Indian friend of mine grew up with his aunt too. He went back to his birthparents when he was fifteen or sixteen years old. A Chinese friend of mine grew up with her grandparents and didn't spend much time with her parents who were working in another city.

In ancient countries like mine, children are often surrounded and cared for not only by their parents but also by their extended family, and even friends and neighbors. You can say the kids belong to everyone.

“I still think this was all too much to handle for a little kid,” Sue says.

“It is nice of you to say that. But it really didn't bother me. I don't remember thinking about it much.”

“It is getting late, we should leave, honey,” Peter says, looking at his watch.

“Oh, yes. The story was so fascinating I lost track of time,” says Sue.

“But we still haven't heard about your amazing vacation,” I say, feeling guilty about taking the whole evening to talk about myself.

“We will tell you about it next time. Tomorrow is Monday,” Peter says, getting up.

“Yes, we have to do it soon though. You know how fast you forget about your vacation” Sue says, rolling her eyes. “This week at work has been so stressful that I already feel I need another vacation.”

We offer to send some food home with them, which they accept. We go downstairs with our guests to say good-bye.

“The food was delicious, especially the rice with those tiny berries,” Sue adds.

“You mean *Zereshk Polo*,” my husband says. “Most of our American friends like that dish.”

"You would have liked it even more if my Mom had made it. She was an amazing cook," I add, smiling at Mom who has appeared on top of the stairs now.

"Oh, you know, I have a close friend who is thinking of adoption. Maybe you could talk to her about your experience?" Sue asks at the door.

I don't know what to say.

"Let's talk about it later. I really only tell this story once in a blue moon!" I force a smile, hoping to discourage her.

"I hope I didn't seem rude," I whisper to my husband once they have left.

"You must be joking! Don't be such a pushover."

He is right. Just because I ended up sharing my story with Sue doesn't mean I would want to share it with a total stranger. Besides, what would I tell this person? I don't know anything about her or the child she is thinking of bringing home.

That night I have a strange dream that I am forced to go back to live with my birthparents. I am all grown up yet am in a crib, my own brass crib. I climb down and try to escape to my parents but the door is locked and the windows are barred. Then *Sima* and *Nader* enter the room and tell me that I better get used to my new home. They tell me that they have taken me back like they said they would. I scream and yell and ask them to let me go to my parents. My face is wet with tears. I start begging them to let me go home but they tell me I *am* home.

"Wake up honey, wake up. You are having a bad dream," I hear my husband's voice.

"What were you dreaming about?"

"T-h-e-y wo- would not l-et me g-o h-ome."

He holds me tight. I am still shaken. I will not tell my secret to anyone else – at least not for a long time.

"I will never let anyone take you from me. You will always be my *yeki-yek dooneh*." Mom whispers as she

tucks me in.

The End