

As the Green Flags Wave

Part I

“And just because I was born a woman, it doesn’t mean my future is sealed.”

One

Spring 1978

Mojan's face flushed a warm scarlet red, nearly the same shade of *Fritillaria* plants in the middle of July. All ten fingers deep beneath the wrinkles of the twin sized mattress sheet. The tan ceiling swayed above; white dots blinked around its surface. This felt so much like a nightmare, but *Mojan* knew it was all too real. Her left foot thrust back, and her right shook in its own direction. The kicks came in waves, some gentle, others more energetic. A swirling sensation coated her midsection. Her cheeks bounced from each side of the thin auburn pillow. Sweat outlined a full damp oval. Piercing rings danced within the crevices of both eardrums. All the pictures she had seen on the internet never showed this side of life.

Mojan? Light cries from another room grew louder. “*Mimi? Where are you?*” It was her younger sister *Sarina* who was fourteen at the time. *Mojan* reached for the dark blue blanket, the corner still inches away from her outstretched right hand. *Mojan* blundered a response back, “*Just one minute, Sarina, I am changing.*” The footsteps paused in the distance giving *Mojan* enough time to cover her stomach with the wool. It rested on an angle still leaving a few toes exposed.

Sarina's shadow enlarged through the doorway; her head tucking left while knocking lightly. “*Can I come in?*” *Mojan* widened her palms propping her shoulders up straight. “*Yes, come in, please.*” The aches still burning, her lower back tingling. *Mojan* knew that she was running out of time. Soon *Baba* would know, *Faraz*, and *Choobin* too. *Mr. Khlufa* would no longer stay after school with her as the prize student in science. Their discussions about *Betelgeuse*, and stars alike would end. Although it shattered her heart, *Mojan* knew the truth. *Mojan* knew the only way to save both lives were through *Sarina's* virgin skin. All the others would shame her, and she would be left to die mercilessly. But with *Sarina* she saw hope. *Sarina's* eyes were pure, her body unblemished. Her breasts were full, her face so youthful. She was a portrait of beauty, lines of suitors would surely flock to their home, and it needed to be done, so *Mojan* was left with no choice.

“*Are you okay?*” *Sarina* asked twirling her sister's brunette curls in rotations. A lump formed in the center of *Mojan's* throat. The corner of her lips dried. Her teeth clamped down hard. If anyone in the world was to accept her, it had to be *Sarina*, for only *Sarina* had shared the same tears with *Mojan*. For it was *Sarina* who was too dammed by *Baba's* infidelities. *Sarina* too was after all a woman, born in a county where their voices are not heard. It was only her who could erase all *Mojan's* mistakes. And so, it was that night when *Mojan* had asked her sister for the greatest favor of all. Looking deep into the eyes of *Sarina's* unknowing gaze, *Mojan* told her everything, leaving no part out. She told her about *Doron*, about him being *Israeli*. The truth spewed from every inch of her mouth. She told her about how they met, the late-night rendezvous. But most importantly she told her about the baby, how she was bearing a Jewish child.

When it was all said, and done, a long silence threaded the bedroom air. *Sarina* laid her right hand atop *Mojan's* firm stomach. "*Just tell me what you need me to do.*" She whispered.

Both girls sat, quietly in the midst of so much burden. The fear rushing through every inch of their veins. But they had each other, if nothing else they had each other, and to both girls, that meant the world.

Two

Spring 1972

“One in, then two jump out, then one back in again. It’s not that hard”

Nearly each powdered line stained with her footprints. The other girls skipping swiftly ahead. *Sarina’s* right leg tipped, stuttering yet again. She spread both feet wide, then jumped in forward once more. *Almost had it that time.* Innocent giggles filled the humid season air. Again, she began, murmuring underneath each gasping breath, *In, then two out, In, then two out.* Both heels jolted up skimming the pavement box by box. The momentum leaned her forward. Her head bobbed with every leap. *There you go! You got it Sarina, there you go! Mojan* clapped not far behind. *One in, two out, One in, two out!* The pattern never stopped, and *Sarina’s* body worked chemistry with the chalk. Toes pirouetting inch by inch, her *Jalabas* bottom cooperating, bouncing forward with a thrust from alternating knees. Only two squares waited by a simple arrangement of two, then one. Like a proud mother *Mojan* gazed on, *“Just two more!”*

A click resonated from her right foot, the pink metal strap flinging away. The shoe no longer anchored in place as it rolled passed the ball of her heel. Bending downward, the shoe frame caved causing her ankle to roll sideways. More giggles, more laughs echoed, but this time to *Sarina’s* expense. The Girls fingers pointed in her direction, smiles dipping face to face. *“I knew she couldn’t get it” Yazmin* chided first, then *Narshood* joined in with her own two sense *“So pretty, but so stupid.”* Crystalized rocks surrounded the gash along her right kneecap, the blood filling a mahogany red. A sliver of the *Jalabas* bottom quarter gone. *Baba* would surely be furious with her, she feared the rigid hind of his knuckles more than the sting which the cut had caused.

“Shut up, all of you shut up!” Without any question *Mojan* ran to her younger sister’s aid. *“Laugh all you want, but you will be nothing more than housewives!”* Unwrapping her Hijabs firm tuck, *Mojan* tied a knot, double looping the corners edges. *“Look at her bald spots! Look how ugly she is!”* The girl’s cruel words continued this time in *Mojan’s* direction. *“She will never find a husband! No man will ever kiss a beast like that!”*

“No Mimi, take it back, I will be fine, I swear!” *Sarina* pushed the cloth into her sister’s palms. *“They are just words Sarina, I do not mind. They are just words. And I have heard so much worse.”* *Mojan* continued tending the lesion.

“But Mimi, your hair, they will never let you back into class without it covered.”

Ignoring *Sarina’s* words, *Mojan* finished. *“Good as new!”* her hand outstretched interlocking between each of *Sarina’s* damp fingers. Together they stood up tall, the girls still chuckling in front. *“Now she doesn’t have her hair covered! Mrs. Rena will surely give her the stick!”* *Sarina’s* eyebrows dropped, her face puzzled at the words.

“What do they mean Mimi?”

Sarina was still two years younger than *Mojan*, so she had never seen any of the girls disciplined with the wooden stick. *“Mimi?”*

The teachers aid shouted in the distance. *“Yella, Line up, everybody single file!”* The three girls scurried ahead, each purposely brushing *Mojan’s* shoulder as they passed.

“Mimi, what are they going to do to you?” *Sarina’s* eyebrows lowered in distress.

Mojan walked quietly ahead, filling to the back of her classes line, *Sarina* limping off behind hers. The older woman’s instructions still rumbled throughout the blacktop.

“I said single file! One behind the other!”

As *Sarina’s* classmates streamed back through the double doors, her anxiety rose to even greater heights. *Sarina’s* head glued to the right; her vision locked onto *Mojan’s* uncovered scalp. Mumbling words at her sister to no avail. *Sarina* was the final child to enter from her class, and so *Mojan’s* group then followed.

Both hands floated by her side, her index fingers tapping along the bulge in each hip. *Mojan’s* tongue poked through the gap in her front teeth, the same way she always had done whenever she felt uncomfortable as a child. The three girls in front filled passed the entrance, each still wide smirks running along their faces. One foot followed another, and *Mojan* watched every step taken. Her head drooped downward, the point in her chin resting just above both breasts. The wind blew slightly stronger. *Mojan’s* bangs split along her forehead, her curls falling back behind her shoulders. Just as *Sarina* had, *Mojan* entered last.

The tenth graders rounded into the first door on the right, while the eight years olds had their own room directly across the hall. *Sarina* sat in the first-row of desks, her seat closest to a thin sheet of glass which overlooked the corridor. Her hands interlocked, her eyes peering to the side.

Mojan didn’t notice *Sarina*, she maintained her vision of the ground below. For a moment, a bit of optimism buzzed within her mind, *maybe they won’t notice, if I act normal, perhaps they won’t even look twice.* As each of the grey checkered tiles led her further and further forward, the hope *Mojan* held onto thinned away. *Mojan* felt every bald spot which lined her scalp, and even more than the fear of the beating she inevitable faced, *Mojan* feared the rest of her classmates the most, and the jokes that would rain down upon her once they each got a peek.

Much like her sister’s fingers, *Sarina’s* feet too tapped anxiously. Her head completely sideways watching *Mojan* inch closer towards her fate. But *Sarina* was young, still very naïve in her own right, so she never truly feared what was to come for *Mojan*. *Sarina* still believed in fairytales, and still believed the clouds were made of marshmallows ever since *Mojan* had tricked her for a laugh. *Mojan* was articulate for her age, so much so that she could convince

Sarina of anything, and her sister would listen blindly. Like the time, *Baba* had caught a frog from the *Calua* river, and brought it home to both girls as a gift.

"You know, that's not really a frog Sarina, his name is Omar, and he is really a prince from Shiraz."

Sarina found an old cardboard box by a pair of *Fraz's* shoes and figured it would be the perfect home for the prince turned frog. She sat beside the box all night, until *Mojan* had told her it was time for bed.

"You want to know, don't you?" *Mojan* giggled on her side of the room both girls shared. *Sarina* ran her fingers along the reptile's scales.

"I want to know what?"

Mojan's eyebrows curled, the top of her forehead wrinkled. *"You know? How to turn him back?"*

Sarina's hand lifted atop her knees. *"But what can I do Mimi? I am just a young girl, there mustn't be much I can do."*

Mojan continued *"There are only three tasks that needs to be done, and once they are completed, he will turn back to normal, back into the prince he once was before the evil spell."*

The pupils in *Sarina's* eyes expanded, her bottom jaw dropped. *"Tell me, please tell me, I will do anything!"*

"Well, if I tell you, you must do as I say, because only certain girls are allowed knowledge of the prince like you will have, so that's the only way I will tell you. Deal?"

"Deal Mimi, I'll do whatever it takes!"

"Well, this is what will bring Omar back to normal. You need three very important materials." *Mojan's* childish prank captivated every inch of *Sarina's* imagination. *"First, you need to collect a small bowl of Fensenjan stew so he will regain the strength he needs."*

"A whole bowl? For a tiny frog? Are you sure Mimi?"

Mojan's cheeks warmed. *"This is the way; I didn't make up the rules? Maybe I should stop telling you, you don't seem too serious."*

"No, Mimi, please, go on, I am sorry for doubting you."

"Okay then, but no more interruptions."

Sarina nodded in compliance.

“You made me lose my spot, where was I?”

“About the bowl of Fensenjan? Remember?”

“Ah yes! Okay, well, after you give Omar the bowl of stew, next is a very important task. But you must do it exactly how I tell you okay?”

“I swear it.”

“Okay, next you will need a sacrifice, after all, he is royalty, and royalty always needs a sacrifice.”

Sarina still nodded along as if she understood.

“You need one drop of blood to mix with the Fensenjan, just one, no more, no less.”

“But whose blood do I need? I don’t want to hurt anyone?” Sarina’s intrigue sparked brighter, her heart fluttering louder than the foyer television set.

“No, no, settle down. You can use your own blood.”

“Oh, right.”

“All you need to do is prick one of your fingers with something sharp, but remember? Only one drop in the bowl, anymore and you will ruin the magical potion.”

“Only one, right, got it.”

Mojan’s hands smeared along each palm, while the thought of the final step churned. *“Hmmm. Ah okay, got it!”* She leaned in closer to her little sister’s face placing her lips beside Sarina’s left eardrum. *“Finally, after every other task is completed, you must kiss the frog, right atop his mouth.”* Mojan’s lips puckered as she tried her best not to laugh.

“Ew! No way! There must be something else I can do?”

“Well then, I guess poor Omar will never get to be a prince again. Poor little guy. I am sure he will understand.”

Sarina pleaded for a different chore.

“I don’t make the rules Sarina, you asked, and I told you. You should be thanking me for letting you know of such a secret.”

Again, Sarina apologized. *“I am sorry Mimi, really, I am. I will change him back tomorrow. In the morning, I’ll ask Baba to have Anahita make Fensenjan for dinner, and I will save some on the side, for Omar.”*

"I just hope you don't delay any longer, Omar doesn't have much more time until he is stuck like that forever."

"No, tomorrow I will cure him, once and for all I will turn him back into the prince he once was, and when I do, maybe he will make me his princess." Mojan's laughs smothered deeply into her only pillow. "That's fine Sarina, we will see tomorrow. Now shut off the light, I have a big test tomorrow, and I need my rest."

Sarina slid the shoebox lid atop all four corners, poking five small holes through as ventilation for Omar to breathe. She pulled down gently on the light chain that hung above her head. Mojan rolled over onto her shoulder, her back facing Sarina. Both girls laid quietly, each drifting off to sleep at different paces. Mojan, who had been nearly dreaming startled as a whispering voice called for her.

"Mimi?" Sarina couldn't sleep.

"What is it, Sarina? I was almost asleep."

Sarina gazed at the back of her sister's head. Bald spots and all, Sarina found Mojan to be flawless, in her eyes, her older sister couldn't have been any more perfect.

"I love you." She said.

Mojan smiled. "I love you too. Now let's get some rest."

When the following morning came, true to her word Sarina pleaded with Baba, and as he always had done with his youngest child, Baba obliged, demanding Anahitta make Fensenjan for supper.

Mojan entered the house quietly walking directly towards her room. Her right shoulder jolted inward shimmying loose both backpack straps. Sarina entered a few minutes after, darting passed all three of her brothers who watched soccer on the foyer television.

"Mimi! Mimi!" jubilation rose the pitch in her cries.

Mojan rolled both of her eyes upward, annoyed already by Sarina's playful nature. She topped book after book along her bed. *"Yes Sarina, what is it now."*

Sarina's eyes gleamed *"Guess where Anahitta is?"*

Mojan's toned grew less and less enthusiastic. *"I don't know?"*

"But you have to guess!"

Mojan finally caved, *"I don't know Sarina, in the kitchen?"*

“If she was in the kitchen then you would have seen her when you came in? Duh.”

Sarina thought she had a point, but in reality, she didn't. Every day, for her entire life, Mojan entered Baba's house the same, head down, eyes glued to the floor, no words spoken. But even still Sarina insisted. *“I'll let that one slide. You have one more guess Mimi.”*

“In the bathroom? I don't know Sarina can we be done now.”

A childish smile bowed along Sarina's lips. *“Not even close Mimi! She is with Baba, at the market!”*

Mojan still unamused. *“And? She goes to the market every day before dinner?”*

“Exactly!”

Even Mojan's wit was rendered puzzled. *“What do you mean?”*

“You just said Anahitta goes to the market before dinner every day, right?” Sarina's palms rolled in tight circles, *well...*

“well, what? Sarina what are you talking about!” Mojan's patience thinned.

“She is going to the market for dinner, and she is going to make Fensenjan!”

It was as if their discussion about the frog never took place the night before. Mojan still sat atop her mattress confused.

“You know? For Omar? Remember? You said I need to feed him a bowl so that he turns back!”

The puzzle clicked into place, but an uneasiness filled Mojan's veins. Her sister had really believed every word she uttered, about the blood, the stew, the kiss, Sarina prepared for it all. But not even Mojan had the heart to break her sister's spirit. And so, she continued with the lie that had already unraveled into something much bigger than she intended.

“Oh right, that. Well Sarina it might not work, you know, sometimes things just don't work out how you plan in life.”

Sarina's heart fell to the floor. *“What do you mean Mimi? You told me that if I followed exactly what you said, Omar would turn back? You promised?”*

Mojan's voice quivered slightly, *“I know what I said Sarina, Its just—”*

“It's just you were lying to me.”

Even still, Mojan couldn't bear to tell Sarina the truth, *“No, I told you the truth Sarina, Its just.”*

“Then what is it, Mimi?”

“It’s just—” Mojan scattered for a response, her intellect would not fail her twice, “It’s just, you need to make sure you do every step the right way, or else it won’t work.”

A bit of relief lifted from the older sister’s shoulders, and *Sarinas* youthful mind never sensed a thing, her innocence still fully intact.

“I know Mimi, you told me that already, don’t worry, I will do everything exactly how you told me, I will make you proud.”

“Good.” Mojan smiled back at her sister.^[SEP]

When supper came, both girls sat quietly alongside their stepmother, on a low wooden table which rolled tightly in front of the longest sofa ottoman. *Baba* and the three boys ate first amongst each other, discussing the *Shah*, soccer, and whatever else men talk about at dinner. It hadn’t always been that way, when both girls were younger, and *Mama* was still alive, the family ate together, *Baba*, *Mojan*, and *Sarina*, all at the same time, sharing the same warm loaves of bread, sipping from the same glasses of tea. But when *Mama* passed away, *Baba* married again, to *Anahitta*, who was a much more traditional *Persian*, who believed that a woman’s place was in the house, tending to the children and slaving in the kitchen. After only two years of marriage, *Baba* moved the family closer to *Tehran*, into a bigger home which *Anahitta* had lobbied for. The house came equipped with a porcelain bathroom sink, and a grey granite countertop which lined three quarters of the kitchen. Three additional rooms this house had too, opposed to the two-bedroom shack which nearly seven people shared for some time back in *Garboj*. *Baba* and *Anahitta* shared a room of course, the biggest room in the building, while *Faraz*, *Charboon*, and *Hamid*, all got to choose their own. *Mojan* and *Sarina* once more got what was left, but neither seemed to mind that much, as the new room was nearly triple the size of the space they had before. For a while everyone lived in harmony, things remained the same for both girls as it always had with *Mama* for quite some time, but as *Baba* visited the hospital more and more for his diabetes, *Anahitta*’s control of the family structure began to expand, eventually reaching the point where both girls ate alone, and away from their father.

“Are you all finished? I am going to put the rest away, so your father has lunch tomorrow when I am gone with Hamid.”

Sarina’s throat gulped loudly. “No!”

Anahitta paused from lifting the pot of *Fensenjan* any higher.

“I mean—, I am not done yet, and it is so good, and I am still very hungry. Please can I have the rest?”

Looking over at her husband, *Anahitta* reluctantly obliged.

“Fine, but make sure you eat all of it, down to the last drop!”

Sarina winked at Mojan.

Underneath her white Jalaba rested a four-inch plastic soup container which *Sarina* had found in one of the cupboards. When *Anahitta* gathered the rest of the plates, *Sarina* reached for the ladle and scooped the remaining stew to the brim of the casing. She popped the lid into place tightly, tucked the container back into her dress, and excused herself from the table. *Mojan* followed not far behind, as she too aided *Anahitta* in the cleaning of most dishes.

Sarina's fingers quivered. She pulled out the shoebox and tucked the cup tightly to the bottom right corner.

"There you go prince, drink up, drink up so you can be big and strong again."

Curiously, the frog leaped towards the steaming bowl before *Sarina* pulled it back out from his reach.

"I nearly forgot!" She said. *Sarina* stood back up onto her feet and pulled out a yellow tack which had held one of *Mojan's* constellation posters she had received from *Mr. Khalufa* along the wall. *"I am sure she won't mind."* *Sarina* reassured herself.

The prick didn't hurt as bad as *Sarina* had anticipated, which made her feel a bit more comfortable with the next task. *"There you go, one drop of blood to make the magical potion work."*

Scanning the area around her, *Sarina* tightened her knees in forward. Both of her palms flattened along the carpet below. *"Just one kiss"* She whispered over and over again, until the suspense of it all brewed a little longer in the pit of her stomach. Quickly, she poked both lips outward squinting both eyelids nearly shut. *"You will be a prince again, and maybe one day I will be a princess."* A light peck caught the frog's mouth, frightening him just enough to leap towards the empty side of the shoebox. Rumblyings in hallway bathroom made their way through *Sarina's* open door. Fearing *Anahitta* would soon find out about the stew, *Sarina* closed the box one final time, sliding it gently back under the bed with the heel of her right foot. All three tasks completed. *Sarina's* imagination ran wild, every new sound which coated the air, she thought to have been *Omar* changing to normal. *"I wonder what's taking him so long?"* She thought for the first hour. But as each minute ticked by the brunette analog clock which hung above the doorway trim, skepticism dripped back into her mind, and for the life of her, she couldn't shake it away.

The warm faucet water streamed atop *Mojan's* oily palms, pumping the tangerine hand soap down till a glob rested within her left. Each inch of her fingers cooled, foaming white until more liquid doused the glaze away. She hummed the beginning verse of *Shara la li*, a nurse's rhyme *Mama* had taught her when she had been just three years old. She held onto everything *Mama* had given to her, rhymes, the short *Persian* phrases to express a sentiment of love, even the gold *Hamza* trinket never uncoiled from around *Mojan's* neck since the day *Mama* passed it on to her.

When she finally made it to her room, she was met by the subtle crackles which shot from *Sarina's* nostrils. *Mojan* undressed and untucked the covers of her comforter with the back of each toe. Her favorite book, *A Big World and an Even Bigger Universe*, sat beside her pillow. On page 67 there was a white satellite illustration which floated horizontally above the Earth. Rumbblings from underneath *Sarina's* bed grew louder as *Mojan's* eyes scanned through bold letters. At first, she disregarded the noise, but after two harder bangs, even *Mojan* began to question the fairytale she had told *Sarina*. "No way, No way." *Mojan's* head moving side to side, her feet quickly kicked off the covers. Sounds still pounded against the box's cardboard frame. She reached for the crate silently, her younger sister still sleeping above. The lid shifted forward, and *Mojan* placed it to the side. *Omar* was still a frog, and *Mojan* was thankful he was still just a frog. The plastic container rested on an angle; the stew seeped from the four cardboard corners. "Ugh *Sarina*, what a mess you made." Both of her hands filled into the empty oval handles, lifting the box from the floor. *Mojan* struggled with what to do. If *Anahitta* found the *Fensenjan*, surely *Sarina* would have been punished, and it would have been all her fault, her fault for tricking her younger sister once again. But if she threw away the box, and *Omar* too, *Sarina* would never forgive her. Just as *Mojan* bent both knees, she noticed a thin red streak floating amongst the walnut-colored concoction. *Mojan* dropped the box once more. *Sarina's* left hand floated loosely within her palm, turning it once more, she noticed a single bead of dried blood. If hearts could truly break, then *Mojan's* would have split in two.

"Mimi?" *Sarina's* hand regained control.

"Yes *Sarina*, It's me."

"Is *Omar* still there?"

Mojan nodded.

"Mimi, I think I did the potion wrong; I think he will never change back to normal. I am sorry Mimi, I am really really sorry."

Mojan's lower back tightened. Her hands pulled *Sarina's* blanket upward.

"Here *Sarina*, get some rest, it will be okay, everything will be okay."

"Can I tell you something Mimi?"

"Sure *Sarina*, anything at all, I am your sister, I will always be here for you, no matter the circumstance."

Sarina's eyes began to fill, and almost instantly a tear streamed down her left cheek.

"I miss *Mama*."

Mojan's muscles froze, her heart hammered away. She wanted to cry, right there with her sister, as she too longed for *Mama's* warmth. She missed everything about her mother. The gentle

clicking of her tea glass three times before she ever took a sip. How her palms smeared white with bits of dough most mornings after she had made everyone breakfast.

“I miss her too Sarina, but she is in a better place now.”

“Does she still think about us? I mean, wherever she is.” Sarina’s tears never let up.

“I know it.”

Mojan combed Sarina’s hair with her right hand, humming the words to Shara la li. Only a few minutes later her younger sister snored once more, and Moján refocused on the shoe box. That night Moján would let Omar free, she ripped the cardboard into several pieces and buried it deep beneath the kitchen trash bag. She cut the plastic soup container in half and rinsed the remaining stew chunks down the drain. Moján hid every trace of evidence from her sister, and when the morning came, she lied to Sarina once more.

“You did it right. The potion, you made it the perfect way, and last night Omar traveled back to Sharaz after kissing your forehead. You did it Sarina, you are a very smart girl.”

Crack! The ruler whipped atop Moján’s knuckles, instantaneously causing blood to form. *Crack!* The wood thrust down again. Moján pulled back her right hand, twirling the Humza charm into her palm. Sarina looked on helplessly through the glass, as Moján was disciplined for not wearing her hijab.

