

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Just before nightfall, Karim climbs the back stairs up to the rooftop to smoke a cigarette. He has finished his afternoon watering a little earlier than usual and has time to sit for a moment before beginning his evening tasks. The sun glints at him on his way up the stairs, and he notices that the sky behind it is streaked with pink and orange. Although he has lived in Tehran for many years now, Karim has not grown used to these sunsets, which are so unlike those he remembers from his childhood in the village of Sousanabad. He has come to associate Tehran sunsets with cars and noise and filth—it seems to him that the colors, like so many other features of life in the city, are coming at him aggressively.

Just as he enters the room on the rooftop that he shares with his wife Fatemeh and their two-month-old baby Zahra, Karim hears the unmistakable clanking sound of the metal garden gate being opened, followed by rustling in the cedar trees lining the driveway. Fatemeh is curled up on the mattress when the sound comes, nursing Zahra. He looks over at the face of his wife and realizes that the noise has startled her out of the trance-like state that usually comes over her when she is nursing the baby.

Chee bood? Fatemeh asks him. “What was that? Go and find out, quickly! Maybe it’s a *dozđ*!”

Karim is not afraid of *dozđ*. He knows that thieves would not come so early at night, before the sun is down, when the streets are still buzzing with cars and buses and people, when the vendors are still peddling their wares, when shoppers are still buying bread for their evening meal. But Agha and Khanoum have gone to a party, and Karim knows that when they go to a party they rarely return before midnight. It cannot be them—so who can it be?

He is scanning his mind for an answer to this question when the dogs start barking and he knows all at once who it is. Karim has lived in close proximity to the dogs for several years now, and

although their incessant barking still disturbs him, he can distinguish a happy bark from a distressed or angry one. This one is happy.

“It’s only Massoud-khan,” he whispers to his wife. He strokes Zahra’s back to the rhythm of Fatemeh’s rocking. *Bekhab*, he says to her softly. “Sleep.”

The baby has lived with the sound of barking dogs since she was born, so Karim knows that the clamor of the dogs will not prevent her from sleeping. But even after three years of living on the rooftop, Fatemeh has never adjusted to the dogs, and will not come out of the room when they are there. This is not because she is afraid of them—Fatemeh isn’t afraid of many things—but because the dogs are *najjess* and she fears that her baby will get sick from contact with them. She says the dogs smell bad and insists that she can smell their filth all the time, even when they are not on the roof.

Before coming to live with Agha’s family in Tehran, it had never crossed Karim’s mind that dogs could be intelligent creatures. He had only seen two kinds of dogs as a child in Sousanabad: the dogs that herded sheep and the dogs that were chained up to scare away thieves. No one in the village ever interacted with these dogs except to kick them or to throw them dry bread and occasional scraps of meat. To the villagers, a dog had no emotions and no redeeming value beyond its ability to protect and frighten. The tails of the sheep dogs were cut off so that wolves could not attack them, and the guard dogs were fed gunpowder so that they would be more vicious. Karim had learned as a child that dogs were considered filthy in the eyes of Islam, but it was difficult for him to imagine the Prophet ever treating a dog this way.

In the years that he has lived in close contact with Agha’s dogs, he has developed a grudging respect for them. He no longer finds their smell offensive, and he is both thankful and impressed that they wait until they are downstairs in the yard to do their business. He has convinced himself that despite their smell and their shedding hair and their slobbering tongues, these dogs are not

unclean at all. After all, Agha is a doctor, and he must know about such things. Surely he would not expose his own wife and children to the dogs if they were *najjess*. When Agha's children were young, the dogs had climbed up on their laps, licked their faces, and even slept under their bed sheets. Karim once heard Agha say that the mouth of a dog was cleaner than the mouth of a human being. But despite his best efforts, he cannot convince Fatemeh of this.

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Karim often feels pangs of guilt toward Fatemeh. He has been married to her for three years now, but it still pains him to remember the day he went *kbastegaaree* to her home, accompanied by his mother, father, aunt, and paternal grandmother. Immediately after the proposal was made, Fatemeh had run out of the room sobbing. Her behavior was of course improper, and Karim had known that it meant she found the prospect of marriage to him distasteful—and yet his heart had swelled with tenderness for her when he had seen her tears. It seemed unfair to him that her feelings would have no bearing on the outcome of the *kbastegaaree* because the deal had already been sealed by Fatemeh's father and his own. Although his desire to marry her had been desperate, he had almost stood up and shouted, “Never mind! Let's forget about the marriage!” While she was out of the room, her mother and father had tried to bridge the awkwardness by extolling her virtues, and within a few minutes, realizing that her antics were both useless and unseemly, Fatemeh had recovered her composure and had returned to the room with a tray of tea and *shirini*, the sweet pastries that had already been purchased in town by her mother to celebrate the occasion.

Karim had wanted Fatemeh ever since he had spotted her washing clothes at the river in Sousanabad one afternoon and had stood transfixed, watching her. From his spot on a rock to one side of the river, he could see the contour of her pubescent body as she swept her washtub up onto her head with one fluid motion, her hips swaying gently. When she bent down to begin washing the clothes, the wind billowed out her dress and Karim caught a full view of her budding breasts. She

had only been 12 at the time, but since that day he had seized every opportunity to watch her. His fascination with her grew daily as she developed before his eyes like ripening fruit.

He had wanted her so much that he convinced himself he could make her happy, even though he knew he was dragging her away from the family she adored, the village she had grown up in, the mountains and vineyards and cherry orchards where she had played as a child—and bringing her to a room on a rooftop in Tehran—a room surrounded by barking dogs. But he also knew that he had a decent salary as a houseboy; that in Tehran there was the promise of new dresses and scarves for her; that she could go shopping with the money he gave her and buy these items for herself. Most importantly, he knew that he would love her and care for her and protect her with the fierceness of the male wolves that roamed the mountains of Sousanabad.

In the days that followed the betrothal, Karim was allowed to visit Fatemeh frequently. Sitting on the floor on a carpet that Fatemeh herself had woven at age 10, he told her of the huge *bazuurs*, of the movie theaters they could go to on his days off, of the Park-e-Melli where they could stroll and eat ice cream on his days off. He told her about the television set that Khanoum had installed in their room; the expensive carpet she had given him as a wedding present; the dresser she no longer needed and had moved upstairs for their clothes.

He did not tell her about the dogs.

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Now Karim hears voices in the yard—he can distinguish at least three, one of them obviously female. He must go downstairs to ask Massoud-khan if he and his guests need anything. He puts out his cigarette, slips on his rubber *dam-pa-ee*, and steps out onto the flat roof. At once the dogs surround him, their tails wagging wildly. *Bereem*, he tells them. “Let’s go.” This is one of the expressions Karim knows the dogs can understand, and he marvels once again at their intelligence.

The back stairs end at the door to the kitchen—a convenient arrangement, since most of Karim’s duties take place in this room of the house. He pushes the kitchen door open and is surprised when the light goes on just moments before he himself finds the switch. Massoud-khan is standing at the other door to the kitchen, flanked by a young Iranian man Karim has never seen before. The young man is unmistakably Iranian, and something about him suggests to Karim that he is a *pa’een-shabree*, from the heart of the city.

Chetori, Karim-joon? Massoud-khan asks, clapping Karim playfully on the shoulder. It has always unnerved Karim the way Massoud-khan addresses him with such casual, intimate expressions, almost as if they were equals. Massoud-khan often insists on attaching “joon” to his name, calling him “Karim dear.” He even finds it uncomfortable that Massoud-khan asks him how he is—this is not a customary part of the dialogue he engages in with Agha’s family, and he never knows quite how to answer. Khanoum and the girls also ask him how he is from time to time, but they don’t look him in the eye from more than a second when they do. Massoud-khan not only looks at him, but fixes his eyes on Karim’s face as if he were studying it.

Massoud-khan has always been different from the others. Once, when no one else was home, Massoud-khan asked Karim to sit down beside the pool with him and drink a cup of tea. Karim was confused as to whether it was an offer or an order, but he turned off his watering hose and accepted the tea. As he drank it, Massoud-khan asked him about his family in the village, about his childhood, and about his satisfaction with his job in Tehran. Karim sat stiffly in the chair beside the pool and answered in short sentences.

Now Massoud-khan is waiting for an answer to his query, and Karim offers a faint reply: *Khoobam, Massoud-khan. Al-ham-do-li’Allah.* “I am well, Master-Massoud, praise be to Allah.” Then he immediately appends words he is far more comfortable with: *Farmayesh-ee dareed?* “Do you require anything?”

“No, Karim-joon, you may go back upstairs. I have some friends here and we’re going to sit outside under the sycamore tree. We won’t be needing you.”

When Karim returns to the room upstairs, Fatemeh and Zahra are both sleeping. Massoud-khan has taken the dogs into the yard with him, so Karim can enjoy a rare moment of quiet on the rooftop before he goes back to the kitchen to begin his evening chores. He crosses the roof, passing under the water reservoir, and sits down on the parapet overlooking the yard. He knows that Massoud-khan and his guests can spot him if they look up, but they appear too occupied to do so.

The moon has risen fully in the sky, and it casts a silvery light on the yard below him. Looking down, Karim sees now that there are three guests: the Iranian boy and two girls. He recognizes one of the girls: she is the daughter of Dr. Salehi. Although he cannot see her well from the rooftop, Karim has seen her many times and knows that she is strikingly beautiful, and, already at 14 or 15, has formidable breasts. He cannot make out the face of the other girl, but judging from her straw-colored hair, she is *kharejee*—a foreigner. Dr. Salehi’s daughter has removed her outer clothing and has stripped down to her swimming costume, and Karim looks down on the bulging cleavage around the bright yellow cloth of her top. He watches as the other girl crosses her arms at opposite ends of her shirt and pulls it off over her head. Her breasts are much smaller, but the light catches the curves of her delicate body, and the alabaster of her skin gives Karim a stirring in his loins.

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Karim has never understood why, if Agha is a Muslim, he allows certain behaviors to take place in his household. He is used to the alcohol drinking. Although he isn’t certain that the Koran condones it, he knows many Muslims who drink alcohol, sometimes right after saying their evening prayers. He cannot disapprove of the cigarettes because he himself smokes, and he doesn’t think this goes against Islam—if it does, half of the men in the streets of Tehran will not be permitted through

the gates of *Behesht*. Karim is also used to the opium smoking, and knows that Agha's father is an addict. One cannot fault an addict. Besides, it is a well-known fact that many mullahs are opium addicts.

No, it is not the smoking or the opium or the alcohol that confuses Karim. What he cannot fathom is how Agha can allow women to parade around his house in swimming costumes that reveal every part of their bodies. To Karim, it has always seemed like these costumes are more suggestive—and more obscene—than even full nudity would be. The little fragments of material stretched across the women's bodies seem to accentuate, rather than hiding, their nipples and pubic hair.

Karim has often wondered if perhaps Agha allows these women to prance through his house because Khanoum is not a Muslim—he has a vague notion that in Khanoum's religion it is acceptable for women to display their bodies publicly. He knows that even though Khanoum does not accept Allah's rules, and even though her religion allows such scandalous behaviors, she is herself a good person—a person with a pure heart. Khanoum wears a swimming costume like the other women do, but somehow it is not suggestive on her, perhaps because her figure is boyish, or perhaps because she doesn't change the way she walks or the expression on her face when she is wearing it. Besides, she always covers up when she knows Karim might be able to spot her. For this reason and others, Karim has come to the conclusion that allowing women to wear swimming costumes in the home is probably Agha's idea.

Fatemeh is also scandalized by the women in swimming costumes. She claims to find them obscene, but Karim knows that she is not squeamish about obscenity. Her objection to the women in swimming costumes has nothing to do with obscenity or with Islam: it is because she thinks Karim looks at the other women, even though he swears that he doesn't. Fatemeh is astute enough to know that Karim has a ferocious sexual appetite, and she no doubt notices that on the nights

after the women have been at the pool he wants her repeatedly, and makes love to her in near desperation, holding her by her hair and thrusting into her with such urgency that he almost causes her pain. Karim senses that seeing the women on the rooftop increases Fatemeh's sexual appetite too. He knows she tries to imagine herself clad that way, her arms and legs oiled as theirs are, making Karim desire her even more. Karim imagines her imagining herself this way, and it increases his lust. Sometimes when Fatemeh is serving tea, even if she is covered from head to toe, Karim senses that the men she is serving are also imagining her body, oiled and clad in nothing but tiny bits of stretched fabric. He seethes with jealousy to imagine other men desiring his wife, but this, too, whets his appetite for her.

Karim has never grown bored of sexual intercourse with his wife. She is not squeamish about sex, and is open to postures and experiments Karim knows would mortify most women from the village. Once she allowed him to take her on the dining room table while Agha and his family were away at the Caspian—in fact, it had been her idea. Karim was watering the geraniums on the porch when she had simply walked over to him, cupped her hand over the front of his trousers, and began stroking him. The water from the hose was still running, and both he and Fatemeh were soaked. She tugged at him and he dropped the hose, not even thinking about the damage that it might do to the garden. Then she led him inside toward the table in the dining room, where she leaned back, pulled her skirt up, and reclined against the table with her legs spread apart.

After Fatemeh had given birth to Zahra, Karim worried that her desire for him would lessen. But it seemed that there were two distinct parts to his wife's nature: when her baby needed her, her maternal instincts switched on with such force that she barely looked in Karim's direction. But when Zahra was safely asleep, Fatemeh again became a wild animal in heat. Once when Zahra fell asleep while suckling, Fatemeh put the baby down, rose from the bed with her breast still bared, moved toward Karim, and yanked at her blouse to display the other breast.

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The moon has now reached its apex, and Karim lifts his gaze away from the revelers and up toward the sky. Unlike the sunset in Tehran, the moonrise always feels comforting to him. He stares for a moment at the gentle, omniscient face of the moon, and the fire in his loins begins to pass. He sits with his feet dangling over the parapet and lights a cigarette, then takes his first deep, satisfying drag. It occurs to him that Massoud-khan and his friends will be able to spot his silhouette and the smoke from his cigarette rising up against the night sky, but a simple glance below him is enough to reassure him that he is safe.

Now the *pa'een-shahree* boy is in the pool with the blond girl, and his arm is encircling her waist, angling up toward her breast. She is squealing as if in protest, but Karim can tell, even from so high up, that she is enjoying it. Massoud-khan is seated on the blanket that has been spread out under the sycamore tree, and the big-breasted girl has her head on his lap. He appears to be ignoring her, despite the proximity of her enormous breasts which even from so many meters above Karim cannot seem to take his eyes away from.

What is Massoud-khan doing? His head is bent down, and he is using one hand to crumble something that he holds in the cupped palm of the other hand. Karim instantly recognizes the gesture: it is what people do when they are preparing to smoke hashish. Karim has witnessed the preparations many times: the tobacco from a cigarette is emptied out carefully, then a brown chunk of hashish is warmed with a lighter, softened, and mixed together with the tobacco, then the cigarette is refilled with the mixture.

He watches as Massoud-khan goes through the whole process, lifts the end-product to his lips, and lights it. He inhales a few times and passes the cigarette to Dr. Salehi's daughter, who rises, her pendulous breasts swaying, and clasps it between her fingers in a scissor-like motion. Karim detects the glint of a vodka bottle in the moonlight, and wonders briefly how Massoud-khan plans

to explain the missing bottle to his father. But Karim knows that it is not difficult to buy alcohol in Tehran and that even children can purchase it if they know where to go. He thinks perhaps Massoud-khan will replace the bottle tomorrow.

When he studies the scene a little more closely, Karim is shocked to discover that the two dogs are also in the pool, swimming across it in strong, capable strokes. Karim has never seen the dogs in the pool, and did not know that dogs could swim. He is torn between respect for this new evidence of their intelligence and disgust at the thought of the dirt and hair and bodily fluids that might wash off their bodies and into the pool. He watches in fascination as both dogs swim toward the shallow end of the pool, climb out, and shake their bodies to dry them.

Fearing again that he will be spotted, Karim drops down onto the tiled floor of the roof with his back against the parapet. Gradually, the smell of the hashish begins to reach his nostrils; even though its source is many meters below him, it is still pungent. The smell has always reminded Karim vaguely of donkey droppings, but he finds it somehow pleasant. He tilts his head back and inhales deeply to fully appreciate the smell, and it makes him feel light-headed. The clouds have now moved away from the moon, and Karim notices that it is not full yet. Out of the corner of his eye he sees a plane overhead, and he has a momentary sensation that he is riding it—not inside it, which he cannot imagine, but atop it, speeding across the night sky. For an instant, it seems to him that the stars and the moon are in motion, swimming through space.

It suddenly dawns on Karim that he still hasn't chopped the *sabzi* for tomorrow's meal, cleaned the stove, emptied the garbage, or wiped the countertops. But if he goes into the kitchen now, Massoud-khan might hear him and think he is spying on him, and he does not want to lose Massoud-khan's trust. Karim knows that Agha relies on him to be an ally and possibly even an informer, and of course he respects Agha and wants to please him and obey him. But he has watched Massoud-khan's transformation from devilish boy to wiry adolescent to strapping youth,

and he feels almost paternal love for his young master. Besides, doesn't Agha himself smoke hashish, drink alcohol, play loud Western music, and flirt with women in swimming costumes? Karim does not believe the son should be blamed for emulating the sins of the father.

He raises himself to a squatting position and takes a final look down at Massoud-khan and his guests. They have emerged from the pool, dripping wet, and are now sitting on the blanket under the sycamore tree. Massoud-khan has picked up that pear-shaped instrument they call a "gee-tar" and is fiddling with the pegs on its neck, which Karim knows means he is about to play it. The *paen-shabree* boy is rolling another hashish cigarette. The two girls have wrapped themselves in towels and are lying motionless on the blanket, and the dogs, spent from their swim, are lying beside them.

Most of his evening chores—the *sabzi*, the countertops, the stove—can wait until tomorrow. But he must feed the dogs. He knows that they will come up to the rooftop at any moment in expectation of their nighttime meal, and that they will bark until they are fed. Their food is stored in a large bucket to one side of the rooftop, and he opens it and places a few morsels in each dogs' dish. Then he stands up, stretches, and walks back across the roof to his room.

The instant he pushes the door open, he hears the gentle chuffing sound Fatemeh makes when she is in deep slumber. The baby is also asleep, wrapped in her swaddling clothes in the cradle. He kicks off his *dam-pa-ee*, unzips and removes his trousers, pulls his shirt over his head, and folds his clothes and lays them tidily on the windowsill. Then he slips under the *lahaf* beside Fatemeh and nestles against her back. The last sound he hears before he drifts off is the noise of the dogs' paws as they pad up the stairs.

Karim is awakened from his sleep an hour later when the dogs begin barking madly. Fatemeh hears the barking too, and her eyes spring open, catching the light from the moon. Karim notices that the expression in her eyes is not one of fear, but of tenderness. *Saaket-baash*, she whispers. "Be quiet."

He gathers his wife into his arms, and they cling to one another as they listen to the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. By the time Agha gets out of his car and discovers his son with a hashish cigarette in his hand, Karim and Fatemeh are too immersed in each other to hear the shouting, the barking, or any other sound besides the thrumming of their passion.